Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Editors' Introduction: Imaginary Futures

by Robert F. Carley, Eero Laine, Yumi Pak, SAJ, Alyson K. Spurgas and Chris Alen Sula | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

ABSTRACT This issue introduction reflects on the upcoming 2025 Cultural Studies Association Annual Conference theme, "Imaginary Futures," and cultural studies futures. This issue contains several articles that address the "presencing" of possible futures, whether through Black popular culture; digital laborers, tech workers and online sex workers; cannabis commodity aesthetics and working-class Black and Latinx life in contemporary California; or racialization of the K-pop band BTS. This issue also features several articles in the special section, "Political Economy and the Arts," edited by Katerina Paramana, contributions to "Aporias," edited by Joshua Falek, and the *Positions* podcast, and six book reviews.

KEYWORDS cultural studies, disciplinarity, futurity

Cultural studies is always temporally bound. And in many ways, our attempts to decipher the present or the past are attempts to discern the future, to plan, to react, to anticipate, and to organize. A serious study of culture (however broadly or narrowly construed) as it is or as it was also compels us to think and study with what might be otherwise. The theme for the 2025 Cultural Studies Association's annual conference < https://www.culturalstudiesassociation.org/conference.html> at the California Institute of the Arts is "Imaginary Futures." In so many ways, the theme can be interpreted to span a thirty-year period when the global neoliberal settlement—in place for more than a decade—was confronted with the "alter-globalization" uprisings, which were notable, too, for their global scope (e.g. Chiapas, Seattle, Genoa, Porto Alegre, etc.). The struggles that constitute this movement were galvanized by many slogans but, perhaps most popularly,

“another world is possible.” The slogan still rings true, but—in the absence of a sustained popular movement and in the wake of more recent “occupations” and Black Freedom Struggles—more distant or, perhaps, as a question today. Cultural studies is confronted with difficult, complex, and necessary sets of questions unified by its style of inquiry into the mercurial present. Both the annual conference and *Lateral* have been extraordinarily fortunate to host rich, transdisciplinary, cogent, and urgent scholarship for decades and will work to continue to do so.

In the call for papers for this year’s meeting, the final suggested sub-theme under the heading of “Imaginary Futures” is “The future of/in cultural studies.” This particularly reflective sub-theme raises several questions. One of the more important questions might have to do with the association of the history of cultural studies (and cultural studies at present) with social and political movements. What *is* the association between cultural studies and political and social movements across its history? Is cultural studies a product or the result of an abeyance of the British New Left; does it mark the defeat of the labor movement? Today, how do the many fields that exist between disciplines that are allied with, or are a part of, the cultural studies project share in the political and intellectual projects that form cultural studies’ conversational spaces, or how and in what way is cultural studies connected together as a project, field, or way of doing work? How has the ongoing restructuring of university colleges and departments affected cultural studies? Cultural studies is an intellectual, political, and pedagogical project, but how, and to what degree, does the awareness and self-positioning of individual scholarship embed itself in and articulate with the “project formation” of cultural studies?[1] Is there a connective thread between Stuart Hall’s work and cultural studies today? Or is that severed? And if it is, should we care?

What remains clear is that the practice of cultural studies is renewed each time *Lateral* and other journals publish scholarly articles; when formal and informal

groups mobilize scholars, cultural workers, and others for annual meetings; and when enthusiastic allies, friends, and fellow travelers organize symposia, colloquia, podcasts, book clubs, and gatherings of any and all sorts. Cultural studies lives on in experimental, subterranean, and fugitive spaces, too—these remain some of the most interesting and intensive sites for cultural studies projects. The broad distribution, and autonomy, of groups that we might identify as participants in cultural studies projects is both a strength and weakness.

What, if anything galvanizes these groups? It does, after all, take time and resources to produce scholarship and to attend meetings. And it takes an enormous amount of time and resources to organize events, to coordinate and curate publications and media, and to contribute to these. These efforts to organize, contribute, participate—to come together—are "the stuff" of the tenuous yet enduring unity of cultural studies. These efforts maintain and extend the conversational aspects of cultural studies. And this work, renewed time and again, is its history. Its principal place is neither in the institutions where one might find cultural studies struggling to maintain a foothold as a program, minor, or in department curricula. It cannot be, but often is, reduced to pieces (or even remnants) peppered into survey courses that acknowledge or hastily summarize its history or its "impact." It remains a fact that it is often a struggle to keep cultural studies fixed within the various institutional maps where it initially emerged (often enthusiastically) in the 1980s and the 1990s. If there is a unifying feature or an articulating principle for cultural studies it might be more closely associated with the idea that another world is possible. However, this slogan does not have the galvanizing force that it did for the alter-globalization movement. After all, "shocking" a group of people into action implies an external force. Galvanizing forces direct articulating principles, of already unified groups, to shift that principle towards strategies and into action.

Furthermore, in this moment of escalating fascist creep, the impending fall of US empire, and the catastrophic destruction of the earth and climate, these

questions become even more urgent. And in the midst of all of this, as Trump assembles a cabinet of billionaires to put the nail in the coffin, we come back to the issues raised by the "alter-globalization" uprisings, and we consider whether another world is, in fact, possible. Grappling with "imaginary futures" has never been more timely, and the concrete project of cultural studies has never felt more in need of galvanizing into action. We must connect our articulating principles to social movements—including movements that will fight for reproductive and gender-affirming healthcare, for educators' rights and academic freedom, for labor and environmental protections. Recently, we have seen cultural studies workers, leftists and, more broadly, indebted multitudes become galvanized by the assassination of a health insurance company's CEO—can we turn that energy into something more organized than the ensuing media spectacle would suggest? Can we link it to the project of cultural studies and imagine something more strategic, more principled, more concrete?

To respond at least in part to the question above about the association of cultural studies with social movements, cultural studies was never a movement. As Roderick Ferguson has argued, cultural studies, like the other "interdisciplines," placed itself (perhaps less fully or willingly when it did) in an institutional context, transferring the energies of the movements from the mid and late 1960s into institutions of higher education, and—by doing so—accepted a position of retreat and regress in new instituted relays of hegemonic power.[2] However, cultural studies' persistent suspicion of disciplines is baked into it in ways that, perhaps, it isn't with other interdisciplines. But, to what end? Although a portion of cultural studies embraces the idea, if not the practices, associated with the undercommons this, in itself, has not been a galvanizing force.

All this is to ask us to wonder about what cultural studies is today and where it is going. We're hoping that you think about this too and, perhaps, you have something to say about it. If so, we hope to see you around at our meeting in 2025. There is still time to submit < https://easychair.org/conferences/?

conf=csa2025> work to the conference. If cultural studies remains an unstable terrain, at least it has vistas from which it is possible to imagine and glimpse a range of possible futures.

This issue contains several articles that address the "presencing" of possible futures. RaShelle R. Peck approaches speculative Blackness and Black futurity through embodied, working-class performativity that challenges and disrupts the human/posthuman binary. Several examples of what she specifies as quotidian aspects of everyday Black lives both exceed a quotidian politics and "leverage critiques of the present." Both Sarah Earnshaw and Curtis Marez focus on social and cultural practices that begin to populate the contradictory spaces engendered by new enterprises and the ways that these materialize labor, and fractionalize and recompose classes. Both also think through the inventive abilities of workers to socialize workspaces differently. Julia H. Lee's analysis of the K-Pop group BTS is focused on performative labor, racialized discourse, and the reproduction of Orientalist fantasies issuing from out of the US's imperial relationship to Korea. This issue also features several articles in the special section, "Political Economy and the Arts," edited by Katerina Paramana, and a contribution to "Aporias," edited by Joshua Falek.

RaShelle R. Peck's "Everyday Black Futurity in Popular Culture" < https://csalateral.org/issue/13-2/everyday-black-futurity-popular-culture-peck/> excavates from multiple sites of Black popular culture a speculative Black futurity through various mediums of expression: visuality, speech, and performativity. Peck examines the use of everyday embodiment and performance as an expansive site of Black creativity and world-making. Her work adds to Black humanism and posthumanism as well as thinking about Black science fiction by showing how quotidian aspects of everyday Black lives, particularly those that refuse the politics of respectability, are generative of modes and models of Afrofuturism. Performances of "ghetto, ratchet, and hood"—such as by performer Cedric the Entertainer, rapper Missy Elliott, and rapper and model Megan Thee

Stallion—specify radical ways to center speculative futurity on defiance, sexual desire, joy, freedom, and pleasure. These aspects of everyday, life-as-lived Blackness mingle human and posthuman to resist racial capitalism's vexed portrayals of Black futurity.

In "The Incubator and the Interregnum: Theorizing the (Work)Places of Class Struggle," < https://csalateral.org/issue/13-2/incubator-interregnum-theorizing-workplaces-class-struggle-earnshaw> Sarah Earnshaw focuses on two groups of digital laborers, tech workers and online sex workers. Earnshaw conceptualizes the cultural practices and spatial organization associated with "platformization," a term that captures the current conjunctural figuration of post-fordist labor, in order to interrogate incubation. Incubation becomes less of a quotidian market-based concept associated with "positive disruption" and more of a way to think about class antagonisms. In a context where the interregnum can be specified through how it recomposes or decomposes classes, incubation can signify the moment where the technical composition of labor begins to make overtures through care, mutual protection, and other solidarities towards a new political composition. Earnshaw pursues a line of questioning that addresses how fractions of classes and occupational groups within them can "co-create places of protection and care to strengthen the struggle over an uncertain future."

In "Cannaboom: Race and Labor in California Cannabis Cultures," < https://csalateral.org/issue/13-2/cannaboom-race-labor-california-cannabis-cultures-marez/> Curtis Marez theorizes a "cannabis commodity aesthetics" that indexes (in a full sensory and semiotic sense) the lived field of Black and Latinx working class pleasures in contemporary California. At the same time, Marez shows how commodity aesthetics contain traces of the material limits associated with the struggles of waged workers. In short, cannabis commodity aesthetics contain contradictions of working-class Black and Latinx life in contemporary California. Marez summarizes these contradictions by explaining, in the article, that "Black and Latinx cannabis cultures combine images of freedom and

transcendence with depictions of the low wage jobs that many Black and Latinx people work. This is because, rather than an impediment to work, cannabis consumption is a kind of support for or accessory to labor. Many consumers use it to dull the tedium and pain of labor and to sustain them throughout the workday." Marez's approach to cannabis culture is situated in a rich contextual rendering of cannabis legislation in California and the emergence of the cannabis industry for medical and then recreational use. His contemporary analysis of cannabis enterprises is developed through interviews, ethnographic work, visual analyses of cannabis packaging, and social media analysis. Marez finds an active attempt to address contradictions of working-class Black and Latinx life within the industry itself through the collectivist orientation of cannabis unions. Here, workers partly socialize their labor in support of one another. Through practices that demonstrate intimate class solidarities, we see members of the Black and Latinx working class engaging in a prefiguration of better worlds despite facing-down the class contradictions that shape the present.

Julia H. Lee's "BTS and the Labor of Techno-Orientalism" < https://csalateral.org/issue/13-2/bts-labor-techno-orientalism-lee/> focuses on the globally popular K-pop band BTS to explore how Asian racialization centers the Asian figure as the embodiment of "the synthetic/mechanistic and the underdeveloped/primordial." Rather than posit these two configurations as oppositional, Lee argues that the seeming contradiction between what we may call technological advancement and organic authenticity is, in fact, non-existent; rather, the contradiction is that these two threads complement each other. Immersing her analysis in the development of the double-sided discourse surrounding the K-pop group BTS and their fans (ARMY), she reads these threads as complementary, illuminating the machinations between "techno-Orientalism, the abstraction and demonization of Asian labor, and Korea in the US imperial imaginary."

In this issue we feature a set of articles that address "Performance and Political Economy: Bodies, Politics, and Well-Being." These articles constitute a larger project, "Political Economy and the Arts," < https://csalateral.org/archive/section/political-economy-and-the-arts/> a special section of *Lateral* edited by Katerina Paramana. The goal of "Political Economy and the Arts" is to place performance studies in dialogue with contemporary critical political economy to produce an interdisciplinary configuration that co-contributes to imagining a world beyond the present.

"Enlightenment by Any Other Name" < https://csalateral.org/section/aporias/enlightenment-by-any-other-name-teed/> by Patrick Michael Teed adds to Aporias < https://csalateral.org/archive/section/aporias/> , a special section that provides snapshots of the field of cultural studies, with an eye towards the lapses, overlaps, and contentions amongst competing theoretical texts. This section features shorter articles by emerging scholars making interventions into contested aspects of cultural studies in order to amplify, rearrange, or delve deeper into aporetic aspects of the field. Teed interrogates critical theory's "uncritical incorporation" of science, ranging from exposing such a fetishization as it impacts institutional funding, to pressing on the racially hierarchical and eugenical logics that are part of science's ontological core.

And, lastly, this issue features the latest installment of Positions < https://csalateral.org/archive/podcasts/positions/> , our podcast series that aims to provide critical reflection and examination on topics in cultural studies for scholars, students, and a general audience. In Episode 4, "Infrastructures of Transiency: On Cruise Ships," < https://csalateral.org/podcasts/positions/infrastructures-of-transiency-cruise-ships/> Cultural Studies Association's Environment, Space & Place Working Group Co-Chair Richard Simpson discusses the local, global, and transnational impact of cruise ships and the cruise ship industry with Constance Dijkstra, International

Maritime Organization (IMO) policy manager for the advocacy group T & E, Karla Hart, co-founder of the Global Cruise Activist Network, and Luc Renaud, Associate Professor at the Department of Urban and Tourism Studies at the University of Quebec in Montreal. This podcast is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Francesca Savoldi.

Notes

1. Some recent arguments about the ways that scholars index a relationship to a broader cultural studies conversation in their teaching, scholarship, and political practice can be found in Lawrence Grossberg, "What Did You Learn in School Today? Cultural Studies as Pedagogy," in *Cultural Studies in the Classroom and Beyond: Critical Pedagogies and Classroom Strategies*, ed. Jaafar Aksikas, Sean Johnson Andrews, and Donald Hedrick (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Gilbert B. Rodman, "The Impossibility of Teaching Cultural Studies," in *Cultural Studies in the Classroom and Beyond: Critical Pedagogies and Classroom Strategies*, ed. Jaafar Aksikas, Sean Johnson Andrews, and Donald Hedrick (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Robert F. Carley, *Cultural Studies Methodology and Political Strategy: Metaconjuncture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); and Robert F. Carley, "Doing Cultural Studies: An Observation on its Politics, Methodologies, and Histories," *Democratic Communiqué* 31, no. 1 (2022). ↩
2. Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012). ↩

Author Information

Robert F. Carley

Robert F. Carley is Associate Professor of International Studies at Texas A&M University, College Station.

View all of Robert F. Carley's articles.

Eero Laine

Eero Laine is an Assistant Professor at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York.

View all of Eero Laine's articles.

Yumi Pak

Yumi Pak is a student, scholar, and instructor of Black literary and cultural studies, particularly within the overlaps and interstices between the United States, Scotland, and Jamaica. She is currently associate professor of Black Studies and affiliated faculty in English at Occidental College. From 2014–2022, she was assistant/associate professor of English at California State University, San Bernardino, where she also held an appointment as director of Ethnic Studies, a long-standing program on campus; in 2022, she co-founded the Department of Ethnic Studies at CSUSB. Her writing can be found in various publications, including *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, *ASAP/Journal*, *Women, Gender & Families of Color* and *Dismantle Magazine*.

View all of Yumi Pak's articles.

SAJ

SAJ is a McNair scholar, an organizer, and an educator, and received their doctorate from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. SAJ has published in edited collections and *Theatre Journal* and has taught at Brooklyn College, Hunter College, the College of Staten Island, Marymount Manhattan College, and New York University. SAJ's research explores policing, war, white supremacy, twenty-first century capitalist economies, gender, disability, and the connections between class formation and political practice.

View all of SAJ's articles.

Alyson K. Spurgas

Alyson K. Spurgas is Associate Professor of Sociology and affiliated faculty in the Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. Alyson researches, writes, and teaches about the sociology of trauma, the politics of desire, and technologies of care. They are the author of *Diagnosing Desire: Biopolitics and Femininity into the Twenty-First Century* (The Ohio State University Press, 2020) and co-author of *Decolonize Self-Care* (O/R Books, 2023) among other articles and essays which can be found at alysonkspurgas.com.

View all of Alyson K. Spurgas's articles.

Chris Alen Sula

Chris Alen Sula is Associate Provost for Academic Affairs at Pratt Institute and Associate Professor in the School of Information. His research explores the digital humanities as a field, including curricula, the early history of DH, and disciplinarity. He has also published on citation studies in the humanities, the politics of technology, and ethical uses of data and visualization.

View all of Chris Alen Sula's articles.

Article details

Robert F. Carley, Eero Laine, Yumi Pak, SAJ, Alyson K. Spurgas, and Chris Alen Sula, "Editors' Introduction: Imaginary Futures," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.1

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Everyday Black Futurity in Popular Culture

by RaShelle R. Peck | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

ABSTRACT Black popular culture draws on everyday Black experiences to create ideas of futurity. There are well known examples of Afrofuturism, such as the *Black Panther* films, as well as the music of George Clinton, Sun Ra, Janelle Monáe, and Erykah Badu, which offer profound versions of Black futures. In addition to these essential examples, some artists are not always explicitly named as such and incorporate robust conceptions of futurity and speculation into their work. This article examines the performances of Missy Elliott, Megan Thee Stallion, and Cedric the Entertainer. It argues that through their embodied performance practices that cite Black life, they create persuasive critiques of the present and move forward ideas about the future. In addition to using futuristic settings and themes, their embodiments work to put forth compelling ideas of speculation. These artists employ notions of the posthuman, a speculative figure that interrogates the category of the human through embodied gestures, dances, and other movement styles. The examined performances challenge notions of respectability established through white norms and neoliberal disciplinary mechanisms that police and harm Black bodies and render them outside of humanness. Specifically, Missy, Cedric, and Megan's performances are rooted in concepts like ghetto, ratchet, and hood, which push back against US society's notions of the human as defined through the respectable laboring body that is also read through the standard of whiteness. The twin dynamic of the human and posthuman provide critiques of the historic and layered expansiveness of anti-blackness while also centering Black people's joy, pleasure, desire, and freedom. As such, these performances proffer notions of the present and future, the human and the posthuman. The force and effectiveness of these artists' performances reside in how they draw from the everyday ways Black people articulate ideas of radical futurity.

KEYWORDS Afrofuturism, Blackness, futurity, performance studies, popular culture

Black popular culture cultivates ideas of futurity and the posthuman that regularly draw on the quotidian experience of Black lives. Through the lens of performance, I examine how artists use embodiment to create speculations of blackness, specifically through the figure of the posthuman that resists, moves beyond, and problematizes ideas about what it means to be human. I closely read the performances of three individuals: comedian and actor Cedric the Entertainer (Cedric Kyles), rapper Missy Elliott (Melissa Elliott), and rapper and model Megan Thee Stallion (Megan Pete). These three performers explore speculative notions of Black life through embodied performance practices. These artists' movement forms draw from everyday, largely working-class Black experiences that have long been signified as ghetto, ratchet, and hood. Their effectiveness at interrogating Black speculation occurs by pulling overt themes of futurity into their embodied performances, which together deliberate about something beyond the present.

This discussion has two overarching and central points. First, Black popular culture provocatively draws from everyday Black life and performances for ideas about futurist speculations. I extend Mark Dery's early observation that Afrofuturism "must be sought in unlikely places, constellated from far flung points."[1] Dery's point here was that Afrofuturism does not have a single focal node but instead can be found in spaces as varied as the examples he gives: the works of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Jimi Hendrix, Lee Scratch Perry, and George Clinton, together with films like *Brother from Another Planet* (1984) and *Born in Flames* (1983). I also take inspiration from Kodwo Eshun's statement that references diversities that point toward Black everyday practices: "It is difficult to conceive of Afrofuturism without a place for sonic process in its vernacular, speculative, and syncopated modes. The daily lifeworld of black vernacular expression [and…] these histories of futures passed must be positioned as a valuable resource [for Afrofuturism]."[2] Building on Dery and Eshun's observations, this discussion explores examples of the various places where Black futures can be produced and enjoyed—within embodied performance practices. Black popular culture's compelling force, in this regard, is its capacity to draw on a futurity that is often

cultivated in “the daily lifeworld” of Black peoples. Second and relatedly, Megan, Missy, and Cedric utilize futurist notions that include both Black humanism and its more subversive counterpart, posthumanism, to reclaim a centrally agentive subjectivity through what are ghetto, ratchet, and hood sensibilities. These performers put forth speculative blackness that refuses the parameters of respectability to express notions of defiance, joy, freedom, sexual desire, and pleasure.

The performances I discuss here have characteristics of both early Afrofuturism scholarship and newer discussions. Initial scholarship focused on, among other topics, how artists and writers work through the racist dichotomy within science fiction that pits Black people as antithetical to progress and technology.[3] Within this negotiation, the rearticulated Black subject as an actor of technology often appeared through the figure of the robot, cyborg, alien, or other posthuman that negotiated anti-blackness, capitalist exploitation, slavery, and colonial exercises.[4] According to Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, a later twenty-first century “Afrofuturism 2.0” has proliferated due to internet practices, social media, and the widespread virtual circulation of cultural production. Afrofuturism 2.0 has used these technologies to rethink a “Black identity [that reflects] counter histories[, …] deep remixability, neurosciences, enhancement and augmentation, gender fluidity, posthuman possibility, [and] the speculative sphere.”[5] Missy Elliott’s “She’s a Bitch” music video (1999) and Cedric the Entertainer’s performance from *The Original Kings of Comedy* (2000) both articulate Afrofuturism 2.0 impulses of seeing futurity through gender and class analyses, while capturing and playing with early themes of computer technologies and space travel. Megan’s 2020 performances following the murder of George Floyd also contribute to this boundary-pushing by incorporating sexual freedoms and pleasure into notions of Black futurity. These three performers exemplify Martine Syms’s discussion of “mundane Afrofuturism,” which resists overly done figures of aliens and space travel and favors “an emotionally true, vernacular reality.”[6] Syms argues that mundane Afrofuturism resists racial capitalism partly through the

“rituals and inconsistencies of daily life[, which] are compelling, dynamic, and utterly strange.”[7] Though Missy and Cedric specifically negotiate the alien and space-traveling figures that Syms seeks to discard, they use everyday Black performances to challenge the stability of these tropes. My objective, hence, is to offer additional considerations to both Afrofuturism scholarship and the performances of these artists by putting embodied performance practices, especially those that are commonplace, as central to analyses. I identify how these reoccurring embodiments of ghetto, ratchet, and hood are not just quotidian but also radical, thereby emphasizing the need to see the common as a subversive site for political intervention.

André Brock (2020) writes about people’s everyday digital cultural practices in “Black Technoculture and/as Afrofuturism,” and demonstrates that Black cyberculture engages in compelling and innovative ideas of speculative politics that embrace the often outcast, disregarded, and unappreciated quotidian expressions of Black life and Black futures. Brock, like Syms, also sees mundanity as ripe for meaning-making. For him, the “mundane digital discourses” of Black Twitter, Instagram, and other platforms theorize about Black futurities by engaging with the “post-present.”[8] Black technoculture reconceptualizes the principles of Black cultural survivability through digital mediums, which amounts to futurist articulations and arguably offers a more profound and relevant conception of Afrofuturism than its traditional versions. Brock asserts that well-known examplars of Afrofuturism, such as Sun Ra, George Clinton, Janelle Monáe, Kool Keith, OutKast, DJ Spooky, Octavia Butler, and Samuel Delany, often do not account for the common practices of Black life. Brock’s focus is the less registered versions of futurity that occur within technoculture and that make space for those subjectivities of blackness that are additionally ignored or excluded, like among queer, working-class, and femme people. Brock sees the formal productions of Afrofuturism as expressly intentionalized for audience consumption and different than everyday Black digital practices. Inspired by Brock’s discussion, I contend that Cedric, Megan, and Missy draw on everyday

blackness to put forth notions of futurity. Even though their wealth and status at least partly remove them from the day-to-day grind of most people's lives, their citations are from vernacular Black culture, which charges these performances with meaning.

I locate the everyday performances of hood, ratchet, and ghetto as examples of Black humanism as well as posthumanism. In much of Afrofuturist thought, the posthuman is the figure that rejects the category of the human as defined through white liberal humanism and its relationship to an always-denigrated blackness as opposition to and as a way to determine whiteness.[9] Black posthumanism can involve a rejection of Black humanism because of the dead-end notion of the human; consider Kodwo Eshun's statement, "posthumans [owe] nothing to the human species."[10] Posthuman enunciations reconstruct relationships with machines, which for Black people has been historically burdened. Hershini Bhana Young comments in discussing Afrofuturist artist John Jennings: "Rather than only recognizing that slavery rendered black bodies into units of capitalist exchange and mechanisms of labor, the post-human renders more productive the relationship between human, race, and technology."[11] Through this lens, the posthuman can be the cyborg, the space traveler, the robot, or the alien. Kodwo Eshun describes how the alien emerges from processes of alienation, and thus, Black people might be considered quintessential aliens: "the idea of slavery as an alien abduction [...] means that we've all been living in an alien-nation since the 18th century."[12]

Popular culture has simultaneously embraced a humanism that has asserted Black people as human, rejecting Enlightenment discourse. In "Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music," Alexander Weheliye examines how the Black voice and its sonorous qualities create notions of the posthuman. Through reading '90s R&B and its use of the vocoder, he concludes that this music has not abandoned Black humanism. For these reasons, he argues Black humanism and post-humanism in music are not necessarily at odds.

“Instead of dispensing with the humanist subject altogether,” Weheliye writes, “these musical formations reframe it to include the subjectivity of those who have had no simple access to its Western, post-Enlightenment formulation, suggesting subjectivities embodied and disembodied, human and posthuman.”[13] Though Weheliye finds these two figures in “constant and dynamic tension” in Black music at times, I argue that the performances I analyze for the most part seamlessly intermingle human and posthuman characteristics.[14]

Black humanism and posthumanism do similar work. The Black posthuman that rejects anti-blackness emerges out of Black humanism, which also defies the same racist legacies. Within popular culture, there is a shared political project that both embark on: to affirm the Black subject. However, I contend that the posthuman, due to its defiance and rejection of what the human is, offers more radical momenta and interventions. Rather than force itself into a category that is built on Black abjection, it forges a new one. The power behind these pieces of cultural production comes when the posthuman puts pressure on and fuses with the energies of Black humanism, and both emergences can simultaneously occur within a singular performance. Performances of ratchetness, hood, and ghetto are examples of the power from both humanism’s affirmation of Black people’s right to self-sufficiency and determination and the posthuman’s rejections of a fraught idea of humanity.

So I depart from André Brock’s contention that quotidian blackness in digital cultures is unconcerned with engaging with notions of the posthuman: “banality and everydayness of Black Twitter, or other spaces where ratchet digital practice is enacted, re-invests futurity into present uses of the digital, rather than in faintly possible Black cyborg or Black magical futures.”[15] I expand contemporary definitions of the posthuman and argue that what Brock calls “ratchet digital practice” can contain elements of the posthuman that are fundamental to cultivating radical spaces of freeness. The performances of the posthuman I

examine are a part of everyday blackness, and additionally, they are also powerful ways Black people negotiate their way out of exclusion and abjectness.

The posthuman figure not only departs from and challenges white humanism's creation of blackness, but it also problematizes the neoliberal humanist figure, *homo economicus*. Here, I draw from Justin Adams Burton, who considers how free market economics shape ideas of humanity by structuring the human and the human's worth through their relationship to work and readiness and willingness to labor productively. In *Posthuman Rap,* Burton examines hip hop subgenres like trap and crunk and understands that while both may engage with labor and economies, these musics offer departures from the neoliberal self as bound to defining the human through notions of work. Of the rap duo Rae Sremmurd, Burton writes, "partying in their queer club, refusing to produce and reproduce, to work the way they're supposed to, [they] arrive at an antireproductive postwork futurity."[16] Pulling Burton and Brock into conversation with each other, I read embodiments of ratchet and ghetto and other everyday performances of blackness—that are often read as nonproductive and thus lacking value—as examples of posthumanism rooted in a radical blackness and futurist politics, even while they contain Black humanist qualities.

Missy, Megan, and Cedric defy neoliberal constructions of the human, and they also, relatively speaking, benefit from the same economic system they critique. Each has acquired wealth throughout their careers and has, at least in part, beneficial relationships with corporate machines.[17] Missy has a net worth of 50 million USD, Megan 14 million, and Cedric 25 million.[18] Therefore, while each artist's work reveals an understanding of Black cultural and communal spaces, most likely and at least partly informed by the majority Black lower-working-class settings from which they come, this should not overshadow their present wealth and their relationships to capitalism.[19] Their privileged location within commercial culture reminds us that Black popular culture can offer critical yet complicated spaces of interrogation.

More Brilliant than the Moon

The Spike Lee-directed *The Original Kings of Comedy* featured Cedric the Entertainer alongside comedians Steve Harvey, D. L. Hughley, and Bernie Mac.[20] In 2001, it received nominations for an NAACP Image Award and the Chicago Film Critics Association Award, and inspired spin-offs like *The Queens of Comedy* and *The Original Latin Kings of Comedy*. During the live performances recorded and played in movie theaters across the country, every element of Black life was up for grabs, including differences with white people, work habits, intimate relationships, family, and children. At times, the performances included using, quite troublingly, misogynoir, ableism, and queer antagonism as devices for jokes and punchlines.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Image-1-Cedric-RaShelle.png>

Figure 1. Screenshot of Cedric the Entertainer in the film, *The Original Kings of Comedy*.

Most noteworthy was the last two and a half minutes of Cedric the Entertainer's routine, where he created a setting of speculative moon travel for Black people. Cedric's performance emerged within a trend beginning from the mid-1990s and

extending to the early 2000s, where a series of films highlighted Black people as central in futurist, alien, and otherworldly narratives beginning with *Space Traders* (1994) and its HBO reproduction, *Cosmic Slap* (1994). As Ytasha Womack notes, films like *Independence Day* (1996), *Men in Black* (1997), *Enemy of the State* (1998), *The Blade Trilogy* (1998, 2002, 2004), and *The Matrix* (1999) all additionally contributed to this trend.[21] In 2024, actor and comedian Katt Williams propelled this skit back into the spotlight when he accused Cedric of stealing from his earlier 1998 BET Comic View performance.[22] According to an unearthed video, Cedric seems to have used Williams's skit of riding in a Cadillac convertible to assemble his vision of Black space exploration.[23]

Cedric begins the skit by acknowledging that Black people might not have the financial wherewithal to manufacture avenues for such a sojourn and proclaims that if white people abandon earth for the moon, "Dammit, we comin' to the moon!" His production of this scene is indexed by the racist tragedy that white folks "think they just gon' leave us here on earth," illustrating an argument that Black people's opportunities to travel, in this case, are carved out of taking advantage of what white people are easily able to forge. Cedric troubles the notion of white flight. Beginning in the 1950s, white flight to suburbs and exclusive parts of cities defined neighborhoods, schools, and employment opportunities before gentrification became the dominant practice that described the shifting community compositions that impacted Black people. In reality, gentrification has existed in the United States since at least the mid-twentieth century, and white flight continues to this day.[24] Within this post-earth setting, Black people will have adapted to a society that continually abandons them, and a Black future, according to Cedric, will still have white people fleeing blackness. Cedric seems to have recognized the direction of space travel. A mere twenty years after his speculations, a "billionaire space race" is in full swing, with Elon Musk's SpaceX, Richard Branson's Virgin Group, and Jeff Bezos's Blue Origin in competition to develop space tourism using private vessels.[25] Since 2020, each of these companies has accelerated ambitions to offer wealthy consumers several

options to leave the planet temporarily. To travel on SpaceX's ship to the International Space Station, a ticket costs 55 million USD; a brief 1.5 hours on Virgin Galactic is 450,000 USD; and Blue Origin's 10-minute flight to space and back will cost 500,000 USD.[26]

Cedric's skit accurately predicts that racial capitalism will seep beyond the borders of the earth's atmosphere, and he responds by depicting a relatable Black working-class ghettocentric aesthetic to celebrate Black futurity. Challenging the attachments of white wealth to mobility, Cedric proclaims, "We'll be right behind y'all in spaceships with Cadillac grills!" This line is a sure nod to George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic's *Mothership Connection* (1975), where the group used space travel and spaceships to reconfigure slave ship economies into ideas of survival and transcendence. Clinton describes, "I was a big fan of Star Trek, so we did a thing with a pimp sitting in a spaceship shaped like a Cadillac, and we did all these James Brown-type grooves, but with street talk and ghetto slang."[27] George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic's funk music effectively argued for Black people's place within space technologies amid a longer tradition that pitted Black embodiment and white technology in opposition. J. Griffith Rollefson writes, "Parliament produces its P-Funk by hyper-amplifying, cloning, and otherwise electronically replicating the funk. [...] Furthermore, their profoundly successful engagement with technology and technological discourses of progress helped to destabilize the fallacious dualism of white technology and black soul."[28] Like Clinton, Cedric also uses ghetto sensibilities to join this travel on his own terms. He grabs a stool and sits inside his imaginary spaceship. Tugging his trousers up slightly to ready himself to hit the gas pedal, he turns the key and moves his foot in downward motions to imitate stepping on the gas. This point is where one finds similarities with Katt Williams's performance. We hear music as an engine turns over in preparation for his travel. With sound technology assisting him, he turns the huge imaginary wheel of his rocket.

Cedric's performance draws on ideas of the posthuman that resist the ways society disciplines people into obedient workers where wealth and success measure humanity. It should be clear—Cedric can barely afford to fly off to the moon, but he does anyway. He sits back, grooves to music, grins widely, and is in no rush whatsoever: "Nigga just rollin', one headlight out, tags be all wrong." As he readies himself on the stool, he sees the rocket through Black perspectives, proclaiming that Black people have no problem driving such a machine because of its similarity to a '72 Deuce and a Quarter (also known as a Buick Electra). The crowd cheers wildly at this reference as they prepare for his departure. He presents himself as what Burton would describe as the "exception to neoliberal humanism" and is viewed as unworthy of flying because he does not portray himself as an idealized worker. Burton explains that those who fail to be a prototype of marketplace success face "biopolitical consequences," such as "increased surveillance and detainment; [and] physical removal from things like healthy food, clean water, education, and other resources that can be the difference between poverty and subsistence."[29] Burton's example here is Black men who are killed by police, as they are "removed from the right to live," and it is easy to see Cedric's character through the lens of a similarly undeserving Black figure.[30]

Perhaps unintentionally, Cedric speaks back against a portion of Steve Harvey's earlier act and confirms that Black people have a right to access outer space regardless of economic access and societal exclusions. This part of *The Original Kings of Comedy* is portrayed as an impromptu interaction between Steve and random audience members. Right before the intermission, a group of seemingly cis men sitting in the front row walk out of the arena with Steve asking where they are going and taunting them for leaving. Then he asks the audience to hand him one man's expensive-looking leather coat and puts it on, which summons cheering and laughter from the audience. After the show resumes, Steve returns to the stage, stating, "Hey, playa, I knew you was gonna come back, hee, hee [...] left something [his coat]! Wit' yo' cool ass!" Steve calls him a thug and exclaims,

“They told me backstage your name Boogie.” Steve asks Boogie what he does for a living, and Boogie states, “computer school.” Steve responds, “Computer school?? Hmmm,” with a mocking side-eye. Steve then says, “Come on now. I asked you what you do for a living, and the answer that popped into your head was computer school. Let me rephrase the question. How do you earn money?” Boogie answers, “computer technology,” with Steve retorting after looking off into the crowd judgmentally, “I know we shouldn’t say this to one another as Black people, but you CAN’T spell motherfucking ‘technology’!” Steve continues, “Know good and hell well your ass ain’t into nothing TECH-NI-CAL. You shouldn’t even judge a book by its cover, but there’s nothing about you that says ‘computer’ or ‘school.’” The back and forth between them continues, with the crowd rolling over in laughter, and finally, Steve ends the section supposedly “outing” Boogie as someone from the streets. The point here is made. Boogie wears baggy pants, sunglasses, and a beanie cap and performs a type of unaffected coolness even when talking to the famous Steve Harvey. For this, Steve leans into a historic trope of Black people as not being innovators within technology, as well as the erroneous neoliberal notion about economically moral uprightness, and turns it into hilarity, refusing to imagine Boogie as a Black man who can express a hood subjectivity and work in the field of technology.

Cedric’s performance resists the confinement that Steve places Boogie in and embodies a Black person with access to space travel technologies. The moment when Cedric admits he has not fixed his busted headlight or renewed his registration tags both challenges neoliberal humanity and reveals the day-to-day lives of many cash-strapped people. Even facing limited resources, he maintains his right to travel to the moon, renouncing the idea of neoliberal personhood through his ongoing proclamations that he will still be space trekking unfazed and styled despite any actual economic barriers.

Cedric the Entertainer’s proffer of a posthuman rejection of *homo economicus* powerfully sets the foundations for how he affirms his humanness through his

elation about his journey. He seizes the right to the category of the human by centering his joy, exemplifying what Alexander Weheliye describes as "denaturalizing the human" while "laying claim to it."[31] Similar to George Clinton's celebration of ghettocentricity, Cedric displays pleasure as he listens and jams to the 1980 funk song "Cutie Pie," smokes a cigarette, and honks, smiles, and waves to others on his way to the beyond. His reference to George Clinton and groove to "Cutie Pie" draws on funk music's otherworldly sonic qualities to create space travel rooted in a Black aesthetic tradition that fits within hood sensibilities. Cedric's performance and affect perfectly demonstrate what Mark Anthony Neal terms a "post-soul aesthetic." Neal argues that popular culture in the '70s, '80s, and '90s, including films and music, departed from the rhetoric of civil rights and Black power as they navigated a world of "deindustrialization, desegregation, [and] the globalization of finance communication," among other forces.[32] Neal describes how the often-criticized figures that appear in popular culture, like "the nigga, queer, crackhead, or baby mama," are fundamental to notions of a Black community and exemplify a "post-soul condition" that thrives on "folk sensibilities."[33] *The Original Kings of Comedy* was released in 2000, with Cedric aptly embodying the figure of the nigga that Neal describes as someone with a comfortable knowledge of both everyday life and his place within a larger social system, which works to "deconstruct the most negative symbols and stereotypes of black life via the use and distribution of those very same symbols and stereotypes."[34]

Cedric's words, gestures, and smirks illustrate how this Black cultural sensibility can be made humorous through its relatability to everyday life. The Black audiences in the film are shown laughing, shouting in affirmation, nodding their heads, standing up and pointing toward the stage, and participating in other methods of resonating with his story because perhaps they, too, relate to disavowing social and economic violence with a joy-centered freedom. Simone C. Drake and Dwan K. Henderson argue that Black performers defy the notion that they must appeal to white people who buy and support their work, instead stating

that “the disruptive trope of blackness in the twenty-first century often weds resistance to pleasure, not for the white audience but for the Black audience in need of catharsis.”[35] Cedric’s reliance on hood performativities and US Black linguistic aesthetics effectively excludes white people from being easy consumers of his stage act, as they are instead the hinge upon which the joke is made funny. He digs at white people’s profound truth that *too* much Black proximity—Black neighborhoods, Black people, blackness—is pervasively undesirable and detestable. Calling out this reality, Cedric exclaims that their travel will not provide the convenient comfort of leaving the tragedies of the earth behind them.

Sighting in the Abyss[36]

Missy Elliott has had more consistent and explicit Afrofuturist themes in her work compared to Cedric the Entertainer and Megan Thee Stallion.[37] The song and music video “She’s a Bitch” dropped in 1999. Years later, Missy performed it in the opening for the 2017 VH1 Hip Hop Honors Awards, which that year highlighted the “game changers” of 1990s hip hop. In 2023, rapper BIA released the song, “I’m that Bitch,” which sampled from “She’s a Bitch” and included the song’s very familiar Timbaland adlibs, as well as sci-fi-inspired costumes, maintaining the song’s longevity and its futurist afterlives. Jasmine A. Moore examines Missy’s music, reminding us that her themes of Afrofuturism are hers but also influenced by director Hype Williams and producer and longtime friend Timbaland. Specifically, Moore focuses on Missy’s use of the monstrous, “the weird,” and the “uncanny” in the music as part of a “visual horror aesthetic [that] operates as a transformative dance with fear to usher in forms of play and pleasure.”[38] Moore contends that “She’s a Bitch” exemplifies “reverberative memory,” a process that resists temporal linearity through sonic remixing and visual elements while also referencing past Black women’s musical traditions, which work to elicit powerful Black futures.[39] The song centers on her lyrics as a boast rap, a defiant assertion that she rules the hip hop game, and the musical instrumentations are fast paced,

simplistic, and repetitive. We hear the recurring announcement, “She’s a Bitch!,” throughout the song. In an interview, Missy discusses how this song is her response to the very real conditions of a music industry whose gatekeepers have been and still are (cisgender) men:

Music is a male-dominated field. Women are not always taken as seriously as we should be, so sometimes we have to put our foot down. To other people that may come across as being a bitch, but it’s just knowing what we want and being confident.[40]

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Image-2-Missy-RaShelle.png>

Figure 2. Screenshot of Missy Elliott in the music video, “She’s a Bitch.”

While her use of props and settings are visually stunning presentations of what the future could look like, Missy’s performance is perhaps more compelling because she relies on everyday performances of blackness to create her speculations. Her performance of the posthuman provides the powerful grounding of her also-compelling Black humanist embodied practices. The video

is shot inside a technological setting or an "imagined computer mainframe."[41] She performs defiant, confident posthuman robotic moves, merging blackness and technologies not at odds but in cohesion. Her self-assured robotic style works to serve as her response to the industry's attack on her humanity. The robot departs from the penultimate speculative figure of the idealized capitalistic laborer, where racialized it contains traces of the slave, and into a usable cultural formation of hip hop blackness. From the 1970s robot dance (and its iterations beyond that period) to Black women adopting machinic qualities in hip hop performances, the figure has been recast as a techno-posthuman celebration of style that rebuffs anti-blackness.[42] Missy twists and distorts the body in stiff yet rhythmic and stylistic yet mechanized ways, which acknowledges society's grip on the Black body and plays with the spaces between freedom and compliance, and between technology and the body. Her performances of the robot, which were and have been part of Black hip hop movement practices, push back against André Brock's contention that "blackness is neither posthuman nor interested in being so."[43] The robot dance is both posthuman and quotidian, and therefore, Brock's idea that "posthuman, technophilic Black futures envisioned by Afrofuturist artists and scholars are removed from everyday life" might not apply to Missy's stage performance.[44] The robot, like so many other Black dances, is rooted in the sociality of and interactions within Black everydayness, and a part of Missy's effectiveness in "She's a Bitch" is drawing on formations of this engaging blackness.

Missy conjures notions of the posthuman to make herself a purposefully unintelligible and unknowable figure. Her robotic moves conjoin with her fusion of the masculine and feminine. In the video, she struts toward the camera and juts her arms, evoking Black masc gesturing. Other times, she moves and touches herself seductively and ever so slightly, dancing in front of femme dancers dressed in risqué outfits. Elliott Powell's analysis of Missy Elliott includes what he terms "a musical aesthetics of impropriety," an organization of sonic characteristics that scrap normative markers entrenched in respectability,

decorum, and decency. Seeing Missy as one who holds queer politics in her work, Powell writes that her music exemplifies "Black queer potentiality outside the traditional evidentiary logic of verifiable, hard, and proper proof that often undergird attachments to the politics of recognition."[45] He points out that Missy has yet to comment on her sexuality, thus refusing the moral policing and surveilling by larger society to which Black people remain subject. These dodgy and shifty practices also occur in her embodied gendered performance practices, where she assumes the right to access any available performances of Black genders within hip hop. In the video, Missy often refuses to look straight at the camera, and when she does, it is menacing and protective, again departing from traditional feminine gesturing. At one point, she flips her hair in front of one eye, limiting the viewer from the pleasure of her eye contact and refusing surveillance from the very cameras capturing her music video. Her performances feel very human, bodily, and banal, and additionally evoke posthuman ideas of a fundamental refusal to fold into a disciplined biopolitical subjecthood. Her stances and gestures are expressive practices that long exist within Black communities and are part of a broader everyday set of embodiments that compel us to relinquish a humanity tethered to policing practices rooted in anti-Black racism and move forward a prospect where the blurring of Black (queer) genders can be gestures of survivability and futurity.

In Missy's video and again in the 2017 performance, blackness is the prioritizing element of the posthuman. In the video, it is her stunning use of Black skin, where she and her dancers, who are all Black, present themselves as darker-skinned, what Jasmine Moore calls "inky blackness."[46] In one of her outfits, Missy appears in black, with large dark lenses covering her eyes. The tops of the lenses are outlined in white diamond-like jewels. In the video, the color white only seems to exist so that viewers can see the use and variations of black. Whiteness exists as the shine of the leather, the glint of the jewels, and the color of her teeth as she displays her defiant facial features and dodgy gazes. Her darkened skin blends into her clothing, which also blends into the checkered black background. Missy

walks through her sanitized, shiny, black tunnel while donning a cape that flaps behind her. At times, she struts, dances, and wraps her hand over her head, conjuring Black masculinity and never breaking from her gait through the tunnel. In the 2017 live performance, Missy recreates the video with symmetric backgrounds and dancers, adding stage props like graffitied buildings. Again, Missy and her dancers are as Black as their shiny machinic outfits. Blackness, especially the choice to be blacker, is a defining feature of Missy's Afrofuture.

I read these aesthetic decisions as posthuman and through Burton's contention that neoliberal humanism renders "identity politics" obsolete in favor of capital-maximizing logic where all are invited into a fabricated multiracial setting if one conforms to marketplace ideologies. Building from Jared Sexton, Burton notes that neoliberal humanism espouses a post-race multiculturalism, whereby blackness, or "anyone still clinging to a racialized group identity[,] is considered out of step, backwards, antagonistic, racist."[47] Missy's aesthetic choice to present herself and her dancers as blacker in both performances deserves our attention, especially in a pop culture setting where musicians standardize their music to appeal to broad audiences and Black rappers (and even at times Missy herself) incorporate lighter-skinned, racially ambiguous, and white performers and musicians into their lineup. Here, Missy constructs a compelling and forceful Afrofuture where blacker blackness combines with everyday corporealities.

Missy uses commonplace Black performativities within her rehearsed routines, which fashion a space of informality that works symbolically to divest from disciplining institutions. In the live performance, she recreates a moment in the video where she and her dancers rise out of oceanic water and continue their routine. Though Missy has never stated as such, this water scene invokes Drexciya, a Detroit-based electronic music duo. In their 1997 album, *The Quest*, the group details how Drexciya is the name of a past sub-Atlantic oceanic place where lived the descendants of pregnant, kidnapped, and sold Africans who were thrown from slave vessels. Drawing on the fact that babies live in amniotic fluid,

the story goes that the babies of the discarded had learned to survive underwater and built a society away from the treacheries of the plantation system. Kodwo Eshun notes Drexciya "speculates on the evolutionary code of black subjectivity," and it is through a frame of survivability that they envisaged this album, as well as a later one, entitled *Grava 4* (2002), that laid claim to the right to space travel.[48] In the video and performance, Missy and her dancers emerge from the water with costumes with alien-like spikes on their heads. They rise on a huge M-shaped platform as if they had survived subaqueous settings. Importantly, Missy's dance movements make undersea living an imagined part of quotidian blackness. When they come to the water's surface, she continues dancing in the same composed, cool, and unperturbed manner. Like in many of her routines, Missy appears to never try too hard when she dances; she moves with just enough energy to give shape to the routine, though her dancers have lively and sharp crispness with their steps. Missy dances with control and style, and her gesturing is recognizable and relatable as she presents this routine as everyday Black movements. She knows the choreography but will only do so much labor. This refusal to work too hard is an instrument of an embodied posthuman Black futurity that conveys a sense of knowing how to survive, knowing how much to give and what to hold onto.

Missy flings the statement "She's a Bitch!" into her sonic space, only to repeatedly scoff at the insult by pulling it into her track and sucking all the pathologizing force out of it. Her rhythmic and robotic dance moves, which fold effortlessly into gender fluidity, and her refusal to be a locatable subject bring posthumanist qualities to bear with her humanism, producing an almost indistinguishable mix of embodied radical blackness.

Go Get a Late Pass[49]

Megan Thee Stallion delivered two performances in the wake of the atrocious 2020 viral recording of white police officer Derek Chauvin crushing Black man George Floyd to death: 1) The pre-recorded performance for the BET Awards in July of 2020, and 2) the *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) show in October 2020.[50] In both performances, Megan leverages the visualities and embodiments of futurity and posthumanity. Megan's performances of ratchet and hood hold both human and posthuman qualities. For the BET performance of "Girls in the Hood" (2020) and "Savage" (featuring Beyoncé) (2020), she presents herself in a dry, postapocalyptic desert landscape that appears dystopic and desiccated, a remarkably familiar scene given our current climate crisis. She and her dancers twerk and throw it back on a rudimentary stage with graffiti art of raised fists and a Black Lives Matter sign in the background. At the end of the video, someone from her crew drives her into the horizon on a futuristic and militaristic vehicle. "Is this the present? Or is this the Afrofuture?," are questions that plague this performance. As tobias c. van veen notes about Public Enemy's 1988 intro "Countdown to Armageddon," where they exclaim "Armageddon been in effect," meaning "total cultural destruction and dehumanization had already happened," that is, under the institutions of slavery.[51] Nothing is more apocalyptic and world-ending than the human trafficking operation across the Atlantic and the ensuing brutality of slavery. According to van veen's reads on Public Enemy, we have been living out the "end of the world" for many years now; we are already in a dystopia. Like so many Afrofuturist projections that serve a dual purpose of interrogating and critiquing the present while offering up a reality beyond this one, Megan Thee Stallion's landscape collides the present and future.

Figures 3 & 4. Screenshots of Megan Thee Stallion in her 2020 BET Awards Performance of "Girls in the Hood" and "Savage" Remix and in her 2020 SNL Performance of "Savage" Remix.

Ratchetness, through embodied booty dancing like twerking and her signature "Aaahhh!," is an articulation of everyday Black futurity centered on pleasure. While Missy Elliott creates an expressivity that shirks gendered boxes, Megan Thee Stallion uses performances of sexual desire read as explicitly feminine. Her declaration "Aaahhh!" where she sticks her tongue out, subtly tilts her head, and smirks suggestively with one side of her lip slightly raised, is a performance of

sexual pleasure. Megan's vocal utterance with her tongue elicits the sounds of someone supposedly gagging when giving oral sex to a person with external genitals.[52] She makes the gesture frequently, including performing on stages and in music videos, posing for pictures, and when approached in public, which makes regular her self-defining right to sexual pleasure as a cis Black woman. She uses the performative utterance flexibly in her raps, and often alongside the declaration "gaggin'," such as in the intro to the "Savage" remix during the BET performance: "I'm a savage, attitude nasty/ Talk big shit, but my bank account match it/ Hood, but I'm classy, rich, but I'm ratchet/ Haters kept my name in they mouth, now they gaggin', Aaahhh!" Megan and her dancers transition into a choreographed dance that includes seductive glances toward the camera while rhythmically shaking their booties and thighs.

Like Missy Elliott and Cedric the Entertainer, the core of Megan's speculative pronouncement is her embodied performance practices. L. H. Stalling moves us toward thinking about ratchetness as a futurist practice, though she stops short of naming futurity or Afrofuturism.[53] In analyzing the role that hip hop strip club culture plays in queer desire and anti-respectability politics, Stallings fits Black ratchetness into Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams*, quoting this line from his work, "Surrealism recognizes that any revolution must begin with thought, with how we imagine a New World."[54] To imagine something different, Stallings notes that Black strip club culture both "undoes" and "creates new performances" of genders and sexualities, thereby enabling participants to divert from the ways society orders Black bodies.[55]

Ratchetness and twerking exist within the spectacular and the quotidian, the human and the posthuman. While these expressivities are given a platform within commercial hip hop culture, they are a part of the ordinary and everyday practices that many Black femmes, trans and cis women, and trans and cis girls employ to celebrate joy, agency, and freeness. Kyra Gaunt informs us that twerking originated from New Orleans hip hop scenes, and since it spread around the

country and globe, Black girls (and those of other races) have taken to the internet to display their skills. Specifically, Gaunt explores "the bedroom culture of YouTube twerking and strip club p-popping" where "twerkers back that thang up into the webcam."[56] Gaunt's discussion is similar to Jasmine Johnson's, who calls these movements "flesh dances," ones that blur "the boundaries between sex and dance and between public and private acts."[57] Since Gaunt's study, we can include platforms like Instagram and TikTok, where trans and cis girls and other queer Black performers capture and circulate their skills. Gaunt and Johnson's conversations encourage us to think about dances in homes, on sidewalks and blocks, and in dance clubs that are not always captured by recording devices.

Many scholars discuss ratchetness and twerking in the context of a salvaged and rearticulated humanity. Aria S. Halliday argues that twerking is an intimate, pleasurable act that allows participants an awareness of the self and the world around them. "The act of Black girls collectively twerking, as a cipher in multiplicitous gyrations and gluteal muscle isolations, becomes an avenue to know the world from one's own body, to know who you are, because of how your body moves."[58] Gaunt, as well as Halliday, regards the twerk as one of many US examples existing within a long tradition of similar Afrodiasporic dances that is an intentional and skilled practice and "a complex spectrum of stylized and rhythmically-timed gestures."[59] More expansively, Bettina Love explores how working-class Black queer youth deploy ratchetness in their everyday lives to address precarity, silence, and marginalization. Love writes that ratchetness is a lens or "methodological perspective that recognizes and affirms the full humanity of Black queer youth for their sexual desires, multiple identities, economic status, style of dress, language, [etc.]."[60] The humanness that Halliday and Love encourage us to acknowledge through ratchetness and the twerk is a recaptured one, occurring when people turn away from the forces that define notions of humanity through narrow registers of whiteness. Twerking is an embodied practice that exists within a long history of diasporic expressiveness, a sophisticated cultural method of producing meaning, and a process of calling

attention to the category of the human through its fleshy, seemingly confrontational, sensual Black style.

Ratchetness and twerking, while rooted in notions of Black humanity, harness fundamental elements of the posthuman to forecast Black futures. As we see with Cedric's masculine hood performativities, ratchetness is "the performance of the failure to be respectable," according to Stallings.[61] To build on Stallings, Black respectability politics do not just prostrate to a whiteness paradigm but also to a neoliberal insistency that one's body must be productive in service of seemingly common-sense neoliberal logic. The refusal to be respectably Black and thus respectably biologically reproductive and respectably neoliberally productive opens a space where Black people articulate pleasure and joy as a way of imagining another present and future through creating a dissociated humanity via posthumanist embodied gestures. The term twerk comes from "to work" or "to *werk*," and even though the dance is really about *workin' that thang* or *workin' that dick* more specifically, it is also a set of movement forms that exist within a society where laboring is the most important thing a person can do.[62] Therefore, twerking exists in broad reference to and within the concept of what it means to work and how that work is tied to and extends from heteropatriarchy. As he does Rae Sremmurd's trap and crunk convergence, Burton might call twerking a type of "postwork." He contends, "The rap duo turn the club into a posthuman vestibule, a space that reconfigures work so that it operates, as [Sylvia] Wynter envisions, outside of dominant ideas of what it is to be human."[63] Though I do not think it is entirely possible for the duo's club scene to "[vibrate] queerly out of earshot of neoliberal humanism," as Burton notes, this analysis does lay bare how artists use their bodies to resist conscriptions in favor of pleasure and leisure.[64] Megan's ratchet embodiments similarly hold queer features. From performing at the 2023 LA Pride in the Park music festival to rapping about her attraction to (cis) women and sexually scissoring with Cardi B in performances, Megan has affirmed that her ratchet embodiments can be queered.[65] André Brock cautions that the posthuman within Afrofuturist productions is restrictive, not allowing for

movement outside of respectability paradigms: It is “an embodiment that Blackness is denied via hyper-visibility, hyper-sexuality, and deviant morality.”[66] However, Megan moves against this fixity and generates a corporeality rooted in the celebration and public display of sexual pleasure as a basis for her musical interventions and, in so doing, pushes back against the figure of the laboring, productive body.

Megan Thee Stallion’s twerk politics and a present-future dystopic setting are, therefore, not strikingly disparate. Instead, both the performances of ratchetness and dried-up futures help to tell a common narrative of Black permanence that withstands campaigns of violence, whether social, economic, or environmental. Megan’s performance is compelling and generative because it is situated within the everyday lives of Black femmes, queer people, women and girls, and anyone else who might twerk, shoring up the ways that many express their bodies in willful defiance of the disciplinary regimes that act in their lives.

In her SNL performance, Megan echoes refrains from Black Lives Matter activists who steadfastly reject calls from all corners of US society to protest police violence in palatable and receptive ways that cater to white people’s feelings and comfort.[67] The SNL setting for her humanist and posthumanist embodiments differed significantly from the desert landscape of the BET Awards, as the SNL stage backdrop included techno-abstract black and white symmetrical moving shapes that gave futuristic vibes, which also matched the outfits of Megan and her dancers. Megan used this stage and song to frame a conversation about the need to protect Black women by using the story of Breonna Taylor and, in so doing, argued that Black people are owed humanity. To set this scene, in September of 2020, Kentucky’s then-Attorney General Daniel Cameron orchestrated what appeared to be a sham hearing about whether to prosecute the officers who shot Breonna Taylor in her sleep during a no-knock raid at the wrong house earlier that year in March.[68] Interrupting the performance halfway in are the sound of gunshots and the sight of bullet holes in the background that

tear away at the abstract shapes coursing through the setting in much the same way bullets tore into and through Breonna Taylor's body. We then hear excerpts from Malcolm X's famous 1962 speech at the funeral service of Ronald Stokes, whom the LAPD killed, as well as activist Tamika Mallory's September 2020 affirmative avowal that Daniel Cameron "is no different than the sellout negros who sold us into slavery." The bullet holes appear on the screen behind the performers as they stand readied and still. Malcolm X's words include, "the most disrespected [...], unprotected [...], neglected [...] person in America is the Black woman"; "Who taught you to hate the texture of your hair, the color of your skin [...], the shape of your nose?"; "Who taught you to hate yourself from the top of your hair to the soles of your feet?" After this, it transitions into Mallory's proclamation. As these words audibly interrupt the music and dancing, Megan and the other performers stop dancing and face the crowd, putting their fists up repeatedly in punch-like motions. "SAVAGE" appears on the backdrops, and blood flows from the bullet holes behind them.

Megan Thee Stallion is a victim of violence herself, as rapper Tory Lanez shot her in the foot after a party in July 2020, just a few days after her BET performance and a few months before her SNL performance. The iniquitous misogynoirist criticism she received online after the incident marked her body as ungrievable and unworthy, as Nikki Lane notes in her appropriately titled piece "Ratchet Black Lives Matter," serving yet another reminder that Black people, and in this case, women, are not afforded humanity.[69] Megan was likely healing from her bullet wounds as she delivered this SNL performance.

Megan's corporeal twerk serves as a response to violence done against Black women. Before I firm up this point, it is critical to point out that the word "SAVAGE," and *not* "RATCHET," appears between Malcolm X's and Mallory's words, a statement of how Megan perhaps perceives the limits of ratchetness in activism. We cannot overlook how the song and much of Black vernacular has recast "savage" from ideas of wild and untamed to fierce, unabashed, and

unafraid. Still though, while savage and ratchet may both subvert and resist, the use of savage in place of ratchet here coincides with Megan and the dancers' notably muted twerking on this SNL stage compared to her BET performance and at other appearances and in music videos. The choreography, which included some toned-down twerking, did not contain the same emphasis on rhythmically moving flesh as other performances. Despite these features, the twerking and other butt-popping moves on the SNL stage assert that ratchetness can be a political critique. Megan and her dancers pair synchronized booty pops and hair whips in the same space as Black fists and calls for justice for Breonna Taylor, conveying a robust sensibility about how Black femmes and others can assume the right to dissent on their own terms. Megan's acknowledgment that Breonna Taylor died because of extrajudicial state violence without much accountability highlights the disposability of Black life in these dystopic times. Moving herself through these traumas becomes "an embodied practice of controlling a marked body" that "[finds] pleasure at the site of racial and gendered injury."[70] Furthermore, ratchetness resists the human as *homo economicus* and protests Black death, thus serving as a regular deployment of posthuman futurity. Megan maintains ratchetness as a communicative method, betraying the notion that Black femme bodies must fall in line to be read as legible and worthy of life and dignity.

Ratchet Black Futures

The performances I discuss have engaged with the future to leverage critiques of the present, citing the everyday techniques Black people use to posit futurity. The ways these performances are tied to the present while speculating about a beyond makes André Brock's term "post-present" an applicable description for Missy, Megan, and Cedric's stage skits, as they are about what happens here and now and what might happen next and there.[71] However, these iterations of Black futurity do not mean that every performance always holds radical and futurist

characteristics. Twerking, for instance, has long been sucked into the machinations of popular culture and social media where non-Black people participate in the dance, mock it, or otherwise engage in the discourse surrounding the movement style. In the case of this discussion, it is Black performers that convey Black futurity, which is a concept always contingent on the performers' intentionality and context.

Megan, Missy, and Cedric stake a claim to Black humanity, one that becomes powerful, defiant, and subversive especially when coupled with posthuman characteristics. These practitioners use everyday Black corporealities to challenge and combat Black people's exclusion from the category of the human. In these cases, the posthuman cannot shed its human origins, just as Black gestures, dances, and movements cannot exist outside of a neoliberal racial capitalist context, reminding us that notions of futurity are tethered to and emerge out of the tragedies of the present. Nonetheless, it is the potency of posthuman enunciations that gives force to the also persuasive Black humanist gestures. Considering how performers use their bodies provides a deeper conceptualization of the critical significance of popular culture in Black life and the various productive spaces of commonplace Black radicality and futurity.

Notes

1. Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (1993): 182. ↩

2. Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 294, https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2003.0021 < https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2003.0021> . ↩

3. Dery, "Black to the Future"; Alondra Nelson, "Introduction: Future Texts," Social Text 71, no. 2 (2002): 1–15, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-20-2_71-1 < https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-20-2_71-1> . ↩

4. Ruth Mayer, "'Africa as an Alien Future': The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Postcolonial Waterworlds," *Time and the African-American Experience* 45, no. 4 (2016): 555–66; Michelle-Lee White Keith Piper, Alondra Nelson, Arnold J. Kemp, and

Erika Dalya Muhammad, "Aftrotech and Outer Spaces," *Art Journal* 60, no. 3 (2001): 90–91, https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2001.10792080 < https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2001.10792080> ; Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 287–302. ↩

5. Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E Jones, *Afrofuturism 2.0* (Lexington Books, 2015), x. ↩

6. Martine Syms, "The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto," Rhizome, December 17, 2013, https://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/dec/17/mundane-afrofuturist-manifesto < https://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/dec/17/mundane-afrofuturist-manifesto> . ↩

7. Syms, "The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto." ↩

8. André Brock, "Black Technoculture And/as Afrofuturism," *Extrapolation* 61, no. 1–2 (2020): 13. ↩

9. Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (Verso, 1998); Hershini Bhana Young, "Twenty-First-Century Post-Humans: The Rise of the See-J," in *Black Performance Theory*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez (Duke University Press, 2014); Tiffany Barber, "Cyborg Grammar?: Reading Wangechi Mutu's Non-Je Ne Regrette Rien through Kindred," in *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, ed. Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones (Lexington Books, 2016). ↩

10. Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun*, 07{113}. ↩

11. Young, "Twenty-First-Century Post-Humans," 48. ↩

12. Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun*, A192. See also Mark Sinker, "Loving the Alien/in Advance of the Landing," *The Wire*, February 1992; Dery, "Black to the Future"; Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Lawrence Hill Books, 2013). ↩

13. Alexander G. Weheliye, "Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music," *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 39, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-20-2_71-21 < https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-20-2_71-21> . See also Marlo David, "Afrofuturism and Post-Soul Possibility in Black Popular Music," *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 695–707, https://doi.org/10.2307/25426985 < https://doi.org/10.2307/25426985> . ↩

14. Weheliye, "Feenin'," 30. ↩

15. Brock, "Black Technoculture," 18. ↩

16. Justin Adams Burton, *Posthuman Rap* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 127. ↩

17. Among other attributes, Cedric stars on the CBS sitcom *The Neighborhood*, and Megan Thee Stallion is an ambassador for the makeup company Revlon and is signed to Jay-Z's Roc Nation, whose parent company is Live Nation Music. See Ivie Ani,

"Megan Thee Stallion Is Officially Signed to Roc Nation ," *OkayPlayer*, n.d., https://www.okayplayer.com/news/megan-thee-stallion-signs-to-roc-nation.html < https://www.okayplayer.com/news/megan-thee-stallion-signs-to-roc-nation.html> ; "The Neighborhood (Official Site) Watch on CBS," *CBS*, n.d., https://www.cbs.com/shows/the-neighborhood/ < https://www.cbs.com/shows/the-neighborhood/> ; "Revlon Announces Megan Thee Stallion as Newest Global Brand Ambassador," *PR Newswire*, August 6, 2020, https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/revlon-announces-megan-thee-stallion-as-newest-global-brand-ambassador-301107720.html < https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/revlon-announces-megan-thee-stallion-as-newest-global-brand-ambassador-301107720.html> . Missy Elliott has worked with Elektra Music of Warner Music Group, and her label, The Goldmind, Inc., formerly under Elektra, is currently under Atlantic Records, also of Warner Music. See Billboard Staff, "Warner Combines Atlantic, Elektra Labels," *Billboard*, March 31, 2004, https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/warner-combines-atlantic-elektra-labels-1440867/amp/ < https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/warner-combines-atlantic-elektra-labels-1440867/amp/> ; Bethany Bezdecheck, *Missy Elliott* (Rosen Pub, 2009). ↩

18. Josh Rodgers, "Despite Earning $150K for 'Barbershop,' Cedric the Entertainer Admits It Bolstered His Career," *Yahoo Finance*, February 23, 2023, https://finance.yahoo.com/news/despite-earning-150k-barbershop-cedric-205654188.html < https://finance.yahoo.com/news/despite-earning-150k-barbershop-cedric-205654188.html> ; In Touch Staff, "She's a ~Savage~! Megan Thee Stallion's Net Worth Is Major — Just like Her Rise to Music Fame," *Yahoo Entertainment*, August 8, 2023, https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/she-savage-megan-thee-stallion-102056182.html < https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/she-savage-megan-thee-stallion-102056182.html> ; Katie Peterson, "Missy Elliott's Net Worth: The Queen of Rap's Massive Career," *Music In Minnesota*, July 7, 2023, https://www.musicinminnesota.com/missy-elliotts-net-worth < https://www.musicinminnesota.com/missy-elliotts-net-worth/> . ↩

19. Missy Elliott is from Portsmouth, Virginia, Cedric the Entertainer grew up in Berkeley, MO, and Megan Thee Stallion's mother raised her in the South Park area of Houston, Texas. These places were majority Black and working class when these performers were young (and still are). ↩

20. *The Original Kings of Comedy* (Paramount, 2000). ↩

21. Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 6–8. ↩

22. Jonah Valez, "Katt Williams Revives Beef with Cedric the Entertainer over Allegedly Stolen Joke," *Los Angeles Times*, January 4, 2024, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2024-01-04/katt-williams-cedric-the-entertainer-joke-theft < https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2024-01-04/katt-williams-cedric-the-entertainer-joke-theft> . ↩

23. dell22619, "Comic View Katt Williams," *YouTube*, July 11, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9ty7Hes9WA < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9ty7Hes9WA> . ↩

24. Alana Semuels, "White Flight and Segregation," *The Atlantic*, July 30,2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/07/white-flight-alive-and-well/399980/ < https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/07/white-flight-alive-and-well/399980/> ; Zawadi Rucks-Ahidiana, "Racial Composition and Trajectories of Gentrification in the United States," *Urban Studies* 58, no. 13 (2020): 2721–41. ↩

25. Jacob Silverman, "The Billionaire Space Race Is a Tragically Wasteful Ego Contest," *The New Republic*, July 9, 2021, https://newrepublic.com/article/162928/richard-branson-jeff-bezos-space-blue-origin < https://newrepublic.com/article/162928/richard-branson-jeff-bezos-space-blue-origin> .
↩

26. Ayman Miazi, "Want to Go to Space? Here's How Much SpaceX, Blue Origin and Virgin Galactic Cost," *Predict*, September 25, 2022, https://medium.com/predict/want-to-go-to-space-heres-how-much-it-costs-4f8e6874f00b < https://medium.com/predict/want-to-go-to-space-heres-how-much-it-costs-4f8e6874f00b> ; William Harwood, "Blue Origin Resumes Passenger Flights, Carries Crew of Six and 90-Year-Old Aerospace Pioneer to Space – Spaceflight Now," *Spaceflightnow.com*, 2024, https://spaceflightnow.com/2024/05/20/blue-origin-resumes-passenger-flights-carries-crew-of-six-and-90-year-old-aerospace-pioneer-to-space/ < https://spaceflightnow.com/2024/05/20/blue-origin-resumes-passenger-flights-carries-crew-of-six-and-90-year-old-aerospace-pioneer-to-space/> . ↩

27. Nettrice R Gaskins, "Deconstructing the Unisphere: Hip-Hop on a Shrinking Globe in an Expanding Universe," in *Meet Me at the Fair: A World's Fair Reader*, ed. Celia Pearce and Bobby Schweizer (ETC Press, 2014), 158. ↩

28. J. Griffith Rollefson, "The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis: Afrofuturism and Anti-Anti-Essentialism from Sun Ra to Kool Keith," *Black Music Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (2008): 100. ↩

29. Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 30. ↩

30. Ibid. ↩

31. Weheliye, "Feenin'," 27. ↩

32. Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic.* (Routledge, 2013), 2–3. ↩

33. Neal, *Soul Babies*, 10. ↩

34. Ibid., 120. ↩

35. Simone C. Drake and Dwan K. Henderson, *Are You Entertained?: Black Popular Culture in the Twenty-First Century* (Duke University Press, 2020), 6. ↩

36. “Sighting in the Abyss” is the name of a Drexciya song from the 1995 album, Aquatic Invasion. ↩

37. Cameron Cook, “Missy Elliott Changed the Future on ‘Supa Dupa Fly,’” *Vice*, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en/article/43dpnj/missy-elliott-changed-the-future-on-supa-dupa-fly < https://www.vice.com/en/article/43dpnj/missy-elliott-changed-the-future-on-supa-dupa-fly> ; Yohance Kyles, “Missy Elliott among Black Futurists Celebrated in the Little Simz-Narrated ‘Afrofuturism’ Series,” *AllHipHop*, April 21, 2017, https://allhiphop.com/features/samaan-ashrawi-missy-elliott-little-simz-afrofuturism-dust < https://allhiphop.com/features/samaan-ashrawi-missy-elliott-little-simz-afrofuturism-dust/> ; R. A. Herukhuti, “Missy Elliot: Afronaut,” *AfrikaIsWoke*, October 1, 2022, https://www.afrikaiswoke.com/the-supa-dupa-fly-afrofuturism-of-missy-elliot/ < https://www.afrikaiswoke.com/the-supa-dupa-fly-afrofuturism-of-missy-elliot/> ; Jasmine A Moore, “Freaks and B/Witches,” *Liquid Blackness* 7, no. 1 (2023): 28–43, https://doi.org/10.1215/26923874-10300456 < https://doi.org/10.1215/26923874-10300456> . ↩

38. Moore, “Freaks and B/Witches,” 30. ↩

39. Ibid., 28–29. ↩

40. Emily Reily, “20 Years Ago, Missy Elliott’s ‘She’s a Bitch’ Video Redefined What Hip-Hop Could Look Like,” *MTV*, 2024, https://www.mtv.com/news/qenf3y/missy-elliott-shes-a-bitch-20-year-anniversary. < https://www.mtv.com/news/qenf3y/missy-elliott-shes-a-bitch-20-year-anniversary.> ↩

41. Moore, “Freaks and B/Witches,” 35. ↩

42. Dery, “Black to the Future”; Robin James, “‘Robo-Diva R&B’: Aesthetics, Politics, and Black Female Robots in Contemporary Popular Music,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 20, no. 4 (2008): 402–23, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-1598.2008.00171.x < https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-1598.2008.00171.x> ; Tricia Rose, “A Style Nobody Can Deal With: Politics, Style and the Postindustrial City in Hip Hop,” in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*, ed. Tricia Rose and Andrew Ross (Routledge, 2014). ↩

43. Brock, “Black Technoculture,” 18. ↩

44. Ibid., 23. ↩

45. Elliott H. Powell, “Getting Freaky with Missy,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 33, no. 3 (2021): 149, https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2021.33.3.145 < https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2021.33.3.145> . ↩

46. Moore, “Freaks and B/Witches,” 34. ↩

47. Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 57. ↩

48. Eshun, “Further Considerations of Afrofuturism,” 300. ↩

49. This is a line from Public Enemy's intro, "Countdown to Armageddon," on the 1988 album, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*.

50. Megan Thee Stallion, "Megan Thee Stallion – Girls in the Hood & Savage Remix Performance {BET Awards 2020}," *YouTube*, July 1, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XJiirJIwXQ < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XJiirJIwXQ> ; Megan Thee Stallion, "Megan Thee Stallion – Savage Remix {SNL Live Performance}," *YouTube*, December 29, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTpilDQXYr0 < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTpilDQXYr0> .

51. tobias van veen, "The Armageddon Effect: Afrofuturism and the Chronopolitics of Alien Nation," in *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, ed. Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones (Lexington Books, 2016), 65.

52. Zachary Wallmark, "Analyzing Vocables in Rap: A Case Study of Megan Thee Stallion," *Music Theory Online* 28, no. 2 (2022), https://doi.org/10.30535/mto.28.2.10 < https://doi.org/10.30535/mto.28.2.10> .

53. L. H. Stallings, "Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination," *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 2, no. 2 (2013): 135–39, https://doi.org/10.1353/pal.2013.0026 < https://doi.org/10.1353/pal.2013.0026> .

54. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Beacon Press, 2002), 193.

55. Stallings, "Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination," 138.

56. Kyra Gaunt, "YouTube, Twerking & You: Context Collapse and the Handheld Co-Presence of Black Girls and Miley Cyrus," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27, no. 3 (2015): 249.

57. Jasmine Johnson, "Flesh Dance: Black Women from Behind," in *Futures of Dance Studies*, ed. Susan Manning, Janice Ross, and Rebecca Schneider (University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 159.

58. Aria S. Halliday, "Twerk Sumn!: Theorizing Black Girl Epistemology in the Body," *Cultural Studies* 34, no. 6 (2020): 882, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2020.1714688 < https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2020.1714688> .

59. Gaunt, "YouTube, Twerking & You," 248.

60. Bettina L. Love, "A Ratchet Lens: Black Queer Youth, Agency, Hip Hop, and the Black Ratchet Imagination," *Educational Researcher* 46, no. 9 (2017): 540–41, https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x17736520 < https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x17736520> .

61. Stallings, "Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination," 136.

62. Gaunt, "YouTube, Twerking & You," 247, 253.

63. Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 101. ↩

64. Ibid., 108. ↩

65. Taylor Henderson, "Megan Thee Stallion Hints at Her Bisexuality (Again) in New Freestyle," *Pride*, August 23, 2021, https://www.pride.com/celebrities/2021/8/23/megan-thee-stallion-hints-her-bisexuality-again-new-freestyle < https://www.pride.com/celebrities/2021/8/23/megan-thee-stallion-hints-her-bisexuality-again-new-freestyle> ; Carmen Phillips, "Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion Are Scissoring," *Autostraddle*, September 8, 2023, https://www.autostraddle.com/cardi-b-megan-thee-stallion-scissoring-bongos-music-video < https://www.autostraddle.com/cardi-b-megan-thee-stallion-scissoring-bongos-music-video/> ; CSW Digital Team, "Mariah Carey and Megan Thee Stallion Headlining LA Pride in the Park 2023," *LA Pride*, March 28, 2023, https://lapride.org/mariah-carey-and-megan-thee-stallion-headline-la-pride-in-the-park-2023/ < https://lapride.org/mariah-carey-and-megan-thee-stallion-headline-la-pride-in-the-park-2023/> . ↩

66. Brock, "Black Technoculture," 16. ↩

67. Titilayo Rasaki, "From SNCC to BLM: Lessons in Radicalism, Structure, and Respectability Politics," *Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy* (2016): 31–38. ↩

68. Irene Oritseweyinmi Joe, "Probable Cause and Performing 'for the People,'" *Duke Law Journal Online* 70 (2020): 138–60. ↩

69. Nikki Lane, "Ratchet Black Lives Matter: Megan Thee Stallion, Intra-Racial Violence, and the Elusion of Grief," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 31, no. 2 (2021): 293–97, https://doi.org/10.1111/jola.12323 < https://doi.org/10.1111/jola.12323> . ↩

70. Johnson, "Flesh Dance," 167, 155. ↩

71. Brock, "Black Technoculture." ↩

Author Information

RaShelle R. Peck

RaShelle R. Peck is an assistant professor in the Ethnic and Race Studies department at Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY. Her current book project, *Nairobi Hip Hop Flow: Diasporic*

Blackness and Embodied Performance in the Underground, forthcoming in Spring 2025 from the University of California Press, is an interdisciplinary study that combines ethnography, archival work, political history, and music and performance analysis to account for the innovations within Nairobi's rap culture. Her research interests include Kenyan and US popular culture, Black performance theory, music studies, and gender and sexuality studies. Her current research has been supported by CUNY's Black, Race and Ethnic Studies Initiative (BRESI).

View all of RaShelle R. Peck's articles.

Article details

RaShelle R. Peck, "Everyday Black Futurity in Popular Culture," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.2

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

The Incubator and the Interregnum: Theorizing the (Work)Places of Class Struggle

by Sarah Earnshaw | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

ABSTRACT Labor landscapes of post-Fordism are commonly characterized by fragmentation, fracture, and atomization, with platformization as the latest abstraction of a workplace that is everywhere and nowhere. The period following the 2008 financial crash has been posed as an interregnum where the exposed contradictions of neoliberalism have not yet ousted this order, while multiple actors jostle to grasp the reins. In this paper, I propose a focus on the cultural practices of place-making in theorizing contemporary class struggle with reference to two groups of digital laborers: tech workers and online sex workers. Taking the incubator—a place of pooled resources for companies in-the-making—as a jumping off point, I consider the interrelations, differentials, and potentials for class (re)composition when the distinction of work from life is as blurred as it is distinguishing. From an autonomist perspective and looking to collectives such as the Tech Workers Coalition and Hacking//Hustling, I unpick the "common sense" of a placeless platformed capital to explore the multiplicity of the "workplace," what counts as "work," and which places enable the imagination of otherwise. As visions of the "future of work" abound I ask, how can research under the umbrella of cultural studies support and co-create points of intervention—places of aggregation—in the interregnum?

KEYWORDS Autonomist Marxism, class, interregnum, labor, sex work, technology

Introduction

Incubators are everywhere: on university and tech campuses, in fields from architecture and art to AI and crypto, even Taco Bell launched an Internal

Incubator in 2021 that seeks to add "restless creativity" to the "pursuit of positive disruption."[1] Business incubators come in a variety of forms with diverse funding sources and host institutions but, as the name suggests, are characterized by providing conditions—namely office space, infrastructure, training, and connections—to nurture the growth of early-stage ventures, protected from external risks until they can strike out on their own.[2] In the tech startup ecosystem, incubators are one facilitator of speculative investment in budding entrepreneurs whose innovation might go on to disrupt industry giants (or at least to be acquired by one), part of the mythic Silicon Valley journey from DIY project in the garage to millionaire founder. Particularly following the global lockdowns at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the stakes of reimagining the future of work in hybrid forms and with flexible workers often refer to creating a workplace that is an incubator of culture, creativity, and innovation. What common-sense assumptions about contemporary work—about what work is and where it can take place—are articulated by the incubator as a model and a metaphor? The labor landscapes of post-Fordism are commonly characterized by fragmentation, fracture, and atomization; platformization is the latest abstraction of a workplace that is everywhere and nowhere. This article proposes a focus on cultural practices of place-making to interrogate the multiplicity of the workplace and distinctions inscribed in and through place with reference to two groups of digital laborers: tech workers and online sex workers. Thinking the incubator with the interregnum is a prompt to reflect on how research generally, and cultural studies particularly, can emphasize antagonisms in contemporary labor and ultimately co-create places of protection and care to strengthen workers in the struggle over an uncertain future. As sex worker and writer Tamara MacLeod argues, "it is important to consider both *why* and *what* we consider 'the workplace', because *where* one works—especially for a sex worker—is vital to thinking about liberty."[3]

Posing the "incubator" as a jumping-off point speaks to three entwined scales through which to approach contemporary class composition: Firstly, the incubator is a node in the tech startup landscape of innovation, populated by and

constitutive of the entrepreneurial self, as one of the "legible emblems" celebrated in the "transnational cultures that orient toward Silicon Valley for models of social change."[4] Secondly, the incubator is a lens through which to center social reproduction in class analysis and consider the liberatory potentials of technology, when not in service of capital. I take a cue here from the Feminist Architecture Collaborative's (also known as F-Architecture) idea of the incubator incubator. In thinking through the ongoing undervaluation of feminized labor across the reimagined office, they "lingered on a concept that might someday manifest the greatest ambitions of flexible work: the premium accommodation of a shambles (our soft bods, or a business-in-formation)."[5] Facing the ambiguities of contemporary capitalism, how might such a "perversion of incubation" inform a reimagined workplace to support both creative practice as well as the messy corporeality of living? Finally, the interregnum is an "incubational moment," which Homi Bhabha describes as converging the traces of past unfinished struggles to hopes and fears for the future in an emerging present, which is "without guarantees."[6]

Working within the interregnum seeks to understand the contours of a period of crisis and uncertainty while in the throws, to intervene within it. Widening inequality, the disintegration of social safety nets and privatization of public infrastructure, and rising debt alongside a dearth of stable employment have marked the post-2008 era, with the COVID-19 pandemic deepening the crises of care.[7] This period also saw the rise of platforms and consolidation of the power of Big Tech; there are few spheres of labor in this period, or indeed of life, that are not related to platforms. Data infrastructures present a seemingly placeless plane of unfettered access, the cloud as an almost-ethereal structure mediating everyday online practices across email servers, storage, data analysis, and software development.[8] While critique largely focuses upon privacy concerns in the accumulation and sale of data, extension of surveillance, and depressing/deskilling workers, the Institute for Technology in the Public Interest call for greater attention to data infrastructures as "financialising literally

everything on a rentable model, thereby indenting institutions, communities, and individuals to their values and services" wherein Big Tech "capture[s] imagination for what a public is, and what is in its interest."[9] Analyzing labors and workplaces often left out of the frame, between perceived prestige or patronization, I outline an autonomist-Marxist informed cultural studies to seek points of commonality, without collapsing into a class monolith.

I approach class struggle through the lens of place, described by Tim Cresswell as "a gathering of materialities, meanings, and practices," as a through-line to think together—while holding in tension—seemingly disparate phenomena in contesting the spatial valuation of work.[10] The paper aims to highlight the relevance of an autonomist class compositional perspective and the politics of place for activist scholarship attendant to the interregnum. I draw upon worker-centered militant research, examples from platforms used daily, as well as media and design discourse on the workplaces of digital labor, but this is predominantly an exploratory theoretical piece charting connections, intersections, and tensions across contemporary class relations. I do not have a populated workplace as case: neither a specific tech startup nor platform for online sex work. Taking the workplace as abstraction to study the interregnum, I unpick the "common sense" of a placeless digital capital through a material interrogation of cultural formations that situate work anywhere, in a compositional analysis that contends with differentiations of workers, on- and offline, in and beyond the workplace.

The workplace performs a powerful function in the legal, cultural, and social ordering of US labor, also serving as a linchpin in the imaginary of class politics. In the most direct sense, the already scant employment protections are tied to the bounded worksite in the temporal limits of the shift: a situation that always excluded many but is increasingly at odds with everyday employment. As Heather Berg argues in relation to porn workers, the blurred boundaries of work/non-work surely have negative effects, yet far from pure pessimism, this blurring has been an appeal, for "if porn work is everywhere, it is also nowhere, because many

workers come to porn in search of a job that feels much less like work"; a question most attuned to the interregnum flips the focus, to ask "how might we construct alternatives—life/workplaces built for workers, not capital?"[11] Approaching shifts in capital's spatial organization from the perspectives of tech and sex worker organizing speaks to distinct but related complexities in digital work across flexibility, autonomy, precarity, and exploitation. Articulating points of inquiry for cultural studies in this interregnum, across groups not often thought in tandem, the paper is structured across the binary of everywhere/nowhere, not only to dig into the dialectics of fluidity and enclosure, but to explore creative strategies of workers within the ambivalence of "anywhere." But first, let's turn to the interregnum and the theorizing of class struggle in formation.

The Interregnum: Morbid Symptoms and Militant Research

Antonio Gramsci's "interregnum" is found in an oft-quoted *Prison Notebooks* passage detailing the "crisis of authority" wherein the ruling class have lost consensus necessary for hegemony, with no successor in place: "the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."[12] As the old order wanes, this is not disorder, rather what Rune Stahl calls a "semiordered system," "characterized by the dysfunction of central institutions that previously kept economic and political contradictions in check; but as long as several viable political and economic strategies exist there is no necessary drive towards a solution."[13] While markedly distinct from 1930s Europe, post-2008 has witnessed a global rise of movements of both Left and Right while neoliberal austerity politics attempt to retain dominance.[14] One could add the current of tech solutionism to the mix, a belief that social problems have a technical fix, that has

sustained and projected the reach of Silicon Valley and, as I note below, become an organizing counterpoint in stirring tech labor movements.[15]

I am drawn to Jeremy Gilbert's reading of the present conjuncture as a dynamic, mutually-reinforcing relation of two processes: the "overall change to the techno-social organization of capitalism" in platform capitalism, and the decline of consensus among the neoliberal political class after the 2008 crash.[16] As Steven Vallas and Juliet Schor argue, the growth of platform economies "coincided with the Great Recession, which facilitated the companies' expansion by creating a ready pool of workers, especially among recent graduates, who could be matched with value-seeking consumers."[17] Before delving into the theory and practice of interregna inquiry, I want to linger upon a morbid symptom in the regulation of the platform economy. Morbid symptoms arise in attempts to manage tensions and contradictions in the loss of hegemony and this brief example is intended to underline the analytical force in studying the overdetermination of crises for scholarly intervention attendant to material and contextual experience.

The passing of the FOSTA-SESTA acts in 2018 is thus far the first substantial change to Section 230 of the US 1996 Communications Decency Act, widely regarded as the bedrock upon which the Internet as we know it functions. Essentially, service providers and platforms are protected from legal liability regarding content published by users as well as in the moderation of that content in enforcing community standards.[18] Both sides of the aisle have argued for reform for different reasons: Republicans largely charge platforms with the over-censorship of conservative views, while Democrats perceive a lack of moderation with the spread of mis-/disinformation (a debate that became particularly heated in the wake of the January 2021 riot at the US Capitol, another morbid symptom).[19] Attempts to wrest power from Big Tech speak to shifting political and cultural terrain, but the legislative response to these debates ultimately added a new spin to a well-worn moral panic. FOSTA (Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act) and SESTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act) became

law in April 2018 and, as the names make clear, are pitched as anti-trafficking legislation, a topic securing bi-partisan support.

The opening section of FOSTA-SESTA includes the dangerous conflation of trafficking with prostitution, noting that Section 230 was never intended to "provide legal protection to websites that unlawfully promote and facilitate prostitution and websites that facilitate traffickers."[20] A star-studded PSA for the acts speaks to the whorephobic assumptions undergirding policy and weaponised morality in regulating cyberspace.[21] It opens with comedian Amy Schumer making light of the form but assuring the viewer "this is really messed up," as she claims that today you can go online and buy a child for sex, "it's as easy as ordering a pizza."[22] Section 230 is implicitly referred to as the "stupid loophole" which enables this "dark side of technology" to remain legal.[23] A montage tells us to #ListenToSurvivors under soaring music, but of course lawmakers did not listen to sex workers who warned of further harm with little impact on trafficking; the discursive stage was set with sex workers as either victim in an exceptional crisis or deviant.[24] The far-reaching remit prompted the wholesale shutdown of online forums as companies feared legal liabilities, whether mediators for the sale of sexual services or hosting content that could be construed as "promoting" or "facilitating" prostitution, which erased and censored harm reduction content, educational material, and art while furthering discrimination of those on the margins.[25] In their more than five years of operation, there has been little evidence of the acts having curbed sex-trafficking, but due to US centrality in digital infrastructure there are global impacts, even where sex work is legal or decriminalized.[26] In the incubational moment, I propose a theoretical framework which seeks to think beyond the workplace and wage relation, center class subjectivities in the contingent struggle of the moment, and co-create places for the imagination and organization of otherwise.

Theorizing the Interregnum

I place an autonomist Marxist lens on the complementary material analysis of culture in conjunctural analysis. These theoretical standpoints share several convergences as both chart a course between abstract theorizing, subject to determinism, and particularism, that fails to situate phenomena within the wider "social totality" or historical moment. Cultural studies is suited to working in the interregnum precisely through attending to culture as the "general social domain of meaning-making," wherein strategies to coalesce the governing "common sense" renders culture simultaneously a crucial site of "normalisation" as well as "contestation."[27] This scale of analysis aims to map the multiple sites not only where orders are imposed but also countered, hacked, and rearticulated. Stuart Hall described conjuncture as "a period during which the different social, political, economic, and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape"; it is only by unpicking these layers to deconstruct the "whole set of understandings which structure institutional life, the economy, everyday thinking, common sense" that one can "intervene effectively in a radical or decisive way."[28] Conjunctural analysis is characterized by an attention to historical contingency in the conditions of possibility of present power relations alongside a partisan perspective focused upon the ongoing processes of struggle.

Autonomist Marxism is similarly tied to a crisis of Leftist politics—particularly Italian communism—emerging in the late '50s, as Leftist parties had abandoned the working class as revolutionary subject and the factory as site of radical action. In response, militant researchers sought to understand and intervene in struggles across distinct workplaces, student movements, the home, and city-level mass community activism, the first phase popularly understood as ending in the '80s amidst state suppression and defeat of the FIAT factory workers.[29] Poised to grapple with the new that cannot be born yet, Alberto Toscana notes the theorists

"tried to anticipate material transformations and spur political strategies" while being "forced to reckon with changes in the political terrain they had not entirely fathomed."[30] Autonomist methods of inquiry have inspired action-oriented research to chart and organize contemporary class struggle; I want to acknowledge the pivotal work of collectives such as Precarias a la Deriva, Notes from Below, and the Angry Workers of the World.[31]

The hallmark of autonomist thought is Mario Tronti's "Copernican turn" in the dialectical relation, the working class driving capitalist development as opposed to merely reacting.[32] The immanence of struggle is at the heart of class compositional analysis, which charts the dynamic relation between "technical" and "political" composition. The former refers to capital's organization of the labor process toward the ends of accumulation through technology, management techniques, and spatial planning, to inscribe physical and social barriers across workers. Crucially, this is not only at the level of production but also refers to the devaluation and control of unpaid, unwaged, and informal work. Political composition on the other hand, denotes the organizational practices of workers that constitute a collective force to overcome divisions and create a unified base of struggle.[33] Capital seeks to decompose working class solidarity and disperse autonomy—changing the technical arrangement—thus spurring new practices of recomposition. The tools of militant inquiry and co-research (*conricerca*) place research in service of struggle to "map the continuing imposition of the class relation, not as a disinterested investigation, but rather to deepen and intensify social and political antagonisms."[34] This distinctly spatial approach to class analysis reads multiple places of politics at the sites of production, social reproduction, and sociality, accounting for distinct forms of autonomy therein, forming "concrete strategies for connecting this terrain with other spheres which could appear separate."[35]

The US autonomist journal *Zerowork* detailed the interconnected scales, where working class autonomy is understood in relation to capital and "official" organs of

worker representation such as unions or political parties, as well as other sectors of workers. This last point refers to the "differences in power to struggle and organize" through divisions produced by capital and often reproduced in Leftist thought, as in the distinction between the waged and unwaged.[36] Feminist and women-led autonomist movements most cogently developed such distinctions, for instance across the urban framework as documented in Lotta Continua's 1974 *Take Over the City*, which flips the traditional script of class mobilization in the rallying cry "let's carry the message of the rent strike into the factories."[37] Connecting antagonisms across housing, schools, food, and transport infrastructure, the wage was rejected as a sufficient vector of struggle when inflation and property speculation dissipated these gains, a perspective that seems depressingly relevant. Challenging the spatial orders of capital that define where work begins and ends, gendered biases reproduced in containing struggle to the point of production, is perhaps most famously articulated in Wages for Housework (WfH). The campaign took shape across the early '70s as a collaboration of women's groups across nations, sectors of work, and Marxist movements, which stressed the inseparable intersections of race, sex, and class in capitalist structures and class composition. As Anna Curcio notes, Wages for Housework was more than a simple demand but "an organizational tool and a call to struggle that aimed at recomposing the many faces of the struggle against women's exploitation and subordination."[38]

I will return to WfH below, but want to stress what co-founder Selma James termed the "organizational strategy of autonomy" sustaining the network, informed by her experiences in anti-racist and anti-imperialist movements. Developed in practice against the pervasive tensions of separatism, the autonomy of each group was prioritized to stop the more socially powerful from taking center stage and obscuring "the leadership that comes from grassroots experience," while attaining unity "by ensuring each sector visibly contributed its experience, tactics, and possibilities, thus refusing be dominated by others."[39] Seeking points of class commonality across shared technical composition reveals

distinct strategies in different political compositions, to grapple with the potentials and difficulties of cross-class alliance. In the ever-shifting compositional plane, the ascendency of neoliberalism also wrought the "feminization of labor," which refers not only to demographic shifts as more women entered workforces but also capital's reorientation in the organization and content of work, wherein the relations, affects and caring labors coded as "feminine" are put to work in employment formations that are undervalued, underpaid, and insecure.[40] Critiquing the post-Operaismo appropriation of "immaterial labor" in theorizing the post-Fordist shift to service and information—most famously associated with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri—as collapsing categories, the Precarias a la Deriva draw attention to the differential "social value" assigned to various labors labelled "immaterial," which "establishes a difference between giving a hand-job to a client and designing a web page."[41] In the atomized, fragmented, and digitally mediated landscape of platformization, an autonomist cultural studies attends to specific terrains of struggle wherein the making productive of informal labor, leisure, and self-expression produces points of aggregation across seemingly distinct spheres. Further, this perspective retains a critical focus on the differential power relations that shape the subjectivity of the software engineer, online sex worker, rideshare gig worker, or content-moderator.

The Incubator: Everywhere

Reflecting upon the inflated valuations of tech startups, software engineer, writer, and activist Wendy Liu refers to the "collective fantasy" that "the tech sector can absorb an infinite amount of surplus capital, that there will be enough successes to make up for all the failures" as compounding the reach of the private sector and enclosure of the digital commons: terms of success are dictated as huge (private) profit which places structural incentives on what—or who—gets funding.[42] Drawing from personal experience, Liu remarked it is "easy to see startups as an escape" from the monotony of the day job, but this individualistic

liberation not only papers over discrimination in the “meritocratic” tech world, it also occludes the years of struggle in the hope that you’ll make it—which you likely won’t.[43] Google’s in-house incubator launched in 2016 with a name that plays on overwork in the industry as well as startups as an escape, Area 120. The company’s famous “20% time” policy encourages workers to dedicate this percentage of the working week to side projects that could benefit the company, which the founders believe “empowers [employees] to be more creative and innovative.”[44] In reference to a joke that Googlers call it 120% time, an extra on top of the demanding workload, Area 120 is publicized as the inverse, working on 20% passions—as long as they are for Google—100% of the time. The chosen projects must leave their full-time position but are provided with the incubational needs to pursue their startup dreams. In the sweeping tech layoffs that began in 2022, Area 120 was hit hard, half of the projects dropped amid a hiring slowdown.[45] Easy escapes, it seems, are reserved for capital.

While platforms and Big Tech infiltrate public, private, work, and home life, and political actors struggle to contain their political and cultural power, what is being incubated when Silicon Valley is the midwife? In the final section of the paper, I turn toward the criminalized labor and communal expertise excluded from the cyber workplace: a hustle culture erasing the hustlers. But first, I focus on the incubator as part of the technical composition of class in the high-tech sector, both a physical worksite and symbol of the “innovation economy” where dreams of autonomy are tied to speculation and financialization, to tease out the hidden divisions coded between hard and software, material and immaterial, and across configurations of digital work: practices made visible in critique by tech worker mobilization.

Incubator Ideals: Place-Making for the Platform

The business incubator has weathered more than one interregnum, emerging as US deindustrialization gathered pace. The world's first incubator opened in New York state in 1959 when a farm machinery company shuttered up, leaving 2,000 workers without employment and an empty factory. The local family who bought the space couldn't find a single tenant, so divided the building to accommodate smaller, fledgling businesses and the Batavia Industrial Center was born. Tenants were offered a wide variety of services beyond the physical space, with a host of amenities that have come to define the concept, such as "short-term leases, shared office supplies and equipment, business advice, and secretarial services."[46] As for the name, so the legend goes, the center was housing overflow coops from a nearby hatchery and while guiding a local reporter on a tour the owner quipped, "these guys are incubating chickens, I guess we're incubating businesses."[47] This storied family enterprise is often held distinct from the contemporary image of high-tech startups aiming for disruption and the vaunted goal of scalability, as a project focused upon the resuscitation of a local town. Yet, incubators as part of a complex of investment in innovation—backed by an assemblage of actors including venture capitalists, universities, local to federal governments, NGOs, and, increasingly, corporations—often remain tied to promises of job creation, social mobility, and local (whether city, state, or regional) regeneration. These visions of social change however are, implicitly or explicitly, connected to Silicon Valley culture.[48]

A 1987 article on "Managing the Incubator System" notes the rapid growth of incubators across the late '70s and early '80s, at the close of the interregnum that saw the consolidation of neoliberal hegemony. A predominant strategy of incubation emerged, described as a conspicuous attempt to build companies, like Batavia, but with the eventual goal that from these controlled conditions,

businesses could then fly the (engineered) nest.[49] Bolstered by the concurrent rise of Silicon Valley and Boston's Route 128, and with policy makers concerned by declining US manufacturing and rising competition from Japanese firms, universities became a central site in promoting technological development, aided by policies such as the 1980 Bayh-Dole Act.[50] Universities now play a major role in the tech landscape, a 2016 study reporting a record high of 42% of US incubators associated with higher education institutions.[51] Autonomist scholar Gigi Roggero posed higher education as a "privileged observatory" from which to analyze the shifts in production toward knowledge, culture, and language "given their status as 'incubators of innovation.'"[52] I would add that with the expansion of incubators across academic institutions, providing debt-laden students with training and connections to the entrepreneurial craft, alongside the pervasive metaphor of incubation as value-creation, this provides another privileged formation to observe convergences across labor relations.

To take us to the current interregnum, 2009 saw a surge in incubators and accelerators worldwide according to consultancy firm Roland Berger, a trend that has continued at a growth rate of 5 times between 2009–2018.[53] Startups generally, and specifically tech startups, have a famously high failure rate and the incubator provides one possible aid in weathering the stormy seas. In an oft-quoted—though rather old and difficult to substantiate—statistic, NBIA's 2012 *State of the Business Incubation Industry* reported an 87% survival rate after five years for businesses who went through an incubator program.[54] Beyond curating a physical place with the infrastructural necessities to work, incubators offer programs catered to crafting the entrepreneur through business management skills training, networking, and mentorship.[55] As Sharon Zukin has argued, mentorship programs are a "deliberate strategy of intergenerational cultural reproduction" reinforced through proximity to other budding founders as well as access to potential investors, partners, clients, and business leaders: incubators form part of an assemblage circulating social, cultural, and economic capital.[56] These programs provide a pedagogical, relational, and financial route to find a

“place” within the social milieu, as well as the market, via a markedly middle-class habitus. Theorizing what she terms the “Planetary Silicon Valley” in the innovation complex of New York City, Zukin hits upon a “basic contradiction” between the material locale of tech ecosystems and the start-up ethos of “growth *unconstrained by geography*.”[57] This seeming transcendence of place through platforms, clouds, and codes, is sustained by real estate speculation, infrastructural investment, and a talent pool of available knowledge workers in concentrated places to host “innovation.” Beyond that, there are the obscured workforces who build the materials and perform micro-work, as well as the growing ranks of contractors across roles, from cafeteria workers to coders.

Design *imaginaires* of the “innovation landscape” offer insight into the role of place in forming the ideal “disrupter,” so long as this disruption keeps capital afloat and the concentration of profit in ever fewer hands.[58] Far from anywhere-work, the blurred boundaries of work/life and public/private are active considerations in the role of architecture and design to curate the incubation environment. Drawing on interviews from architects and “users,” a 2017 collaborative report between Brookings and the Project for Public Space reads the growth of “Innovation Spaces”—a complex including research institutions, incubators, accelerators, co-working sites, and startup hubs—as the “physical manifestations of broader economic, cultural and demographic forces, *elevating what matters in today’s economy*.”[59] Thus, the authors argue, a shift in design has followed place-making that nurtures the contemporary knowledge worker who demands comfort, sociality, and integration of technology. The flexibility of contemporary work is read into design which strikes a balance between privacy and collaboration.[60] Beyond workplaces to put pen to paper, fingers to keys, or stylus to smart board, the role of “public space” is given protracted attention in research on innovation space as well as architectural discourse.

What Surabhi Pancholi, Tan Yigitcanlar, and Mirko Guaralda refer to as the ideal “live-work-play-learn environment” is one where public space is utilized to create

a “sense of place,” a concept which a 2023 McKinsey report on building tech ecosystems also refers to in balancing infrastructural place-making for “live, work, and play” with redressing diversity “imbalances” through “inclusive growth.”[61] Incubators and the most privileged sectors of digital labor are pitched as maintaining “balance” where the contradictions in capital have eluded institutional containment. Ray Oldenburg’s concept of the “third place”—as distinct from home and work—has long been associated with catering to the needs of mobile and freelance knowledge workers, and the “Innovation Spaces” report situates this space directly in the fluid tech workplace. Noting that interview partners had described a relatively recent focus upon the role of public space, particular reference is made to the “reimagined ground floor” as an “interstitial space between public and private.”[62] Posed as “neutral ground,” the blurring of public/private in a workplace that blurs work/life not only renders *anywhere* as the entrepreneur’s workplace but speaks to the putting to work of public space as productive in attracting and stimulating innovation.

Who is imagined in this public-private-work-life environment? In an interview of “leading architects weighing in on the future of work,” LoriAnn Mass notes the movement toward the model of the “working lab or incubator” as “deepening the connection” between work and life, illustrated anecdotally through a client who resisted the shortening of the building café queue, as “it’s a place for democratic, productive exchange.”[63] Considering the reimagined (private) public, I am drawn once again to F-Architecture’s musings on the incubator, where the “same shitty dynamics of *feminization* and late capitalism are reproduced in the co-work of our dreams”: which leads me to ask, what of the baristas, cleaners, security, and other service staff tasked with upholding the third space milieu?[64] For whom is the ground neutral? The imagined “future of work” defined by transparency, opportunities to collaborate, and a sense of belonging further perpetuates feminization in cultivating emotional investment in the company as “family,” work rewarded by social recognition.[65] Incubators as a “physical manifestation” of “what matters in today’s economy” are part of a technical composition that

valorizes the entrepreneurial subject as the driving force of technological development, in competition for resources, whose startups go on to hire workers and restart the self-same cycle. Tech worker mobilizations have rallied against the interrelated separation of high-tech roles as *the* tech worker and their popular occlusion as workers at all, to exacerbate contradictions from the workplace to platform capitalism.

Tech Work Composition

The popular image of tech workers as predominantly young men who want to change the world while getting rich, playing ping-pong between meetings, and having care needs provided by the company is reproduced in the incubator "innovation" landscape. As Tech Workers Coalition (TWC) organizer Kristen Sheets argued, a major hurdle in organizing is the "conflation in popular media between the tech worker and the tech executive."[66] Within the constraints of this article—to highlight points of intervention for cultural studies in the "incubational moment"—I explore the growth of the tech labor movement to touch upon episodes, strategies, and organizations in the cycle of struggle. Barriers that are enforced socially, physically, and culturally to decompose solidarity are sources of antagonism across tech work; mobilization has focused upon building a cross-class *worker* subjectivity to assert collective power over the technologies that structure work and life.

An oft-noted challenge of tech labor politics is a notion of worker struggle tied exclusively to the wage. But as an engineer remarked following the establishment of Kickstarter United in 2020, there is a well of "untapped energy" as tech workers seem "particularly interested in the product of their labor and to the ethical considerations behind it."[67] The unionization campaign at Kickstarter was sparked by management's overruling of the Trust and Safety team, bending to criticism from far-right site *Breitbart* to cancel the campaign *Always Punch Nazis*—a comic

book whose title plays on the widely memeified moment when neo-Nazi and alt-right Trump supporter Richard Spencer was punched in the face—which spurred grievances over decision-making and equity in the workplace.[68] Trump's election, yet another morbid symptom, is widely recognised as catalyzing a broader movement from the ranks of salaried employees, particularly when a "Tech Summit" hosted by the incoming president made overtly clear that Big Tech was willing to use the fruits of their labor to be evil.[69] The Never Again Pledge—a reference to IBM's technological support to Nazi Germany in "optimizing" the Holocaust—published the day before the summit, was a declaration signed and circulated by tech employees pledging their refusal to partake in the "incoming administration's proposed data collection policies" in fear of mass deportations and the proposed "Muslim Registry."[70] When Google signed a contract with the Department of Defense in 2017 to develop "Project Maven," an AI tool to harness cloud computing and machine learning in drone footage analysis, the collective action in protest was described by one organizer as the Never Again Pledge in action.[71]

Dissent for Project Maven initially grew within the teams working on the secretive contract and, as workers researched the project on the company network while management dismissed concerns, changed focus to informing and mobilizing their fellow Googlers on the internal social network.[72] Resistance comprised a "patchwork of different efforts" with groups formed across the global company, including protest quits, research to document the project, direct confrontation of the issue at company meetings, and the flooding of their social network with anti-Maven memes.[73] A campaign leader highlighted the impact of organizing through the means and vernacular of the tech workplace, noting the traction of these memes became evident when Google leadership began "using them as one of their metrics for measuring internal chatter about the project."[74] Management attempted to assuage employees by claiming the relatively small $9 million contract was a one-off for non-offensive purposes, but revelations that Maven was a pilot project for future collaborations and a pitch for the cloud computing

JEDI project were followed by leaked internal emails that showed projections of up to $250 million in annual revenue.[75] As pressure grew, Google ultimately announced in June 2018 that it would not renew the contract. The months of unrest had made the capital-labor distinction visible across supposedly flat hierarchies and demonstrated the possibilities of collective agitation.

This militant energy and experience was put to practice in a series of actions addressing the interrelated ethics of their labor products and workplace. One of the seven core organizers of the global Google Walkouts on November 1st 2018, Meredith Whittaker, described the influence of Maven on the recent wave of "elite tech worker" actions as having "flushed the tech nervous system with the idea that organizing was a legitimate and useful means of checking these powerful companies."[76] The protest, sparked by a *The New York Times* article detailing support of executives accused of sexual misconduct, saw 20,000 workers leave their desks.[77] Swiftly assembled and "organized by mainly femmes and people in operational roles whose job is to organize shit all day anyway," as Whittaker noted, the action turned "their daily wage work skills against the company, using all this talent differently."[78] The open workplace culture at companies such as Google and Kickstarter, transparency and dialogue between employees and executives intended to inspire collective investment in the work, is part of the "disruption" logic which can be seen to have facilitated what Romano Alquati termed "invisible organization": the informal networks linking workers were used to strategize dissent and incite coordinated action which "inheres not outside capital or in flight from it but truly *within*."[79] Just as the networks at Google provided tools to organize seemingly spontaneous protest, the purportedly progressive workflow at Kickstarter meant communications across teams about major decisions was commonplace. When a team member took to Slack to inform colleagues about the top-down cancellation of the anti-fascist comic, the enraged response ultimately led management to reverse the decision but also restrict staff discussion and input, which organizer Clarissa Redwine described as setting the stage for unionization: "workers were beginning to see the intention behind

Kickstarter's power structure."[80] As capital reacts to worker political composition, the cycle of struggle shifts to new terrain.

The crackdown at Google after such high profile, and costly, collective action sought to temper the flames by removing prominent leaders and foreclosing the famed "radical transparency" such as in a company wide email warning employees that unauthorized access of "need to know" material could result in disciplinary action or termination.[81] The history of worker-led protests at Google, alongside the tightening grip of the corporation, inspired and informed Alphabet Workers Union (AWU), launched in January 2021 as part of the Communication Workers of America's (CWA) Coalition to Organize Digital Employees (CODE). A common feature of the recent tech movement has been a focus on education and expertise-sharing, since many are relatively inexperienced or new to organizing in a market with famously high turnover where lessons can be lost across a shifting workplace. Challenging the perception of tech as "unorganized" entails not only dispelling the notion that engineers are too privileged to organize but also creatively overcoming obstacles posed by US labor regulation in workplaces where huge workforces might be dispersed geographically and differentiated by status while networked across projects. Worker-led collectives and organizations in unconventional collaborations with "traditional" unions have positioned themselves as nodal points within a broader tech labor ecosystem. Kickstarter United, for example, searched for a partner willing to "get creative" in applying best practices to a new industry while ensuring "a lot of space for workers to lead," ultimately choosing the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) to become the first wall-to-wall NLRB-union at a US tech company.[82] OPEIU built on this success to launch the Tech Workers Union Local 1010, focused on providing institutional support to worker-led workplace organizing. Since "the tech industry is too vast to be organized by a couple staff organizers at a few of the major unions," the hallowed goal of scalability is detourned into building situated, networked units of collective power.[83] At a firm like Google, navigating vast scales within the workplace, the non-contract union

supported by CWA is described by Ben Tarnoff and Nataliya Nedzhvetskaya as an "experiment," stressing experimentation as necessary to create models that cannot be abstractly theorized but "must be worked out in practice, above all by the workers themselves," while acknowledging criticism from some Google organizers that CWA were "claiming turf" or sidelining more radical strains.[84] In analyzing cybernetic technologies in global class composition, Nick Dyer-Witheford concluded that "the inherent contradiction between the fast time of digital mobilization and the slow time of movement building will also have to be reckoned into organizing practice."[85] In the remainder of this section, I draw attention to the organizational forms seeking to bridge such spatial and temporal gaps, first looking to TWC.

Founded in 2014 as a collaboration between former cafeteria worker Rachel Melendez and software engineer Matt Schafer, a perspective on the commonalities of struggle across the tech workplace spectrum as well as the differential access to social power was central to TWC from the outset.[86] The spike in activism in tech offices had been preceded by unionization efforts across contracted services workers, and TWC initially focused on aiding campaigns, to tear down the "invisible walls between different kinds of workers" and garner support from more privileged workers at these sites.[87] A recent example of such collaboration took place in Germany as the largely migrant gig workforce of the delivery app Gorillas reached out to organizations including Berlin TWC during their agitation across a series of Wildcat strikes in 2021–2022. TWC's contribution to the effort is described by Valentin Niebler as: "first, passing on knowledge and resources," particularly in the intensive process of forming a workers council; "secondly shielding off risk" by participating in blockages, strikes, and labor courts; and "thirdly amplifying voices" in press interviews and across their "well-established networks" in Germany and beyond.[88] Building upon the founding focus on support to widen the remit of "tech worker" action, TWC recalibrated as a vehicle to generate worker-subjectivity in the "white-collar" ranks to identify

distinct positions in a shared struggle, which led the group to the autonomist tactic of workers' inquiry.

Within TWC, such inquiry was first organized in dedicated sessions with questionnaires, described as attending to the basics of organizing, to get coworkers talking, critiquing, and reflecting on one's place within structures to foster "mutual and collective agitation."[89] But reflecting on the series of successes across 2018, it shifted from a tool to what R.K. Upadhya called a "general mentality that needs to pervade all aspects of our organizing"; the inquiry mentality is illustrated as prioritizing group discussions centered on "connecting the topics to our actual lives and experiences" at events, as well as one-on-one conversations that fuel "more radical and democratic workers organizations"—held distinct from the sales pitch approach of "mainstream or conservative unions."[90] The grassroots coalition has expanded across the US and internationally, with local chapters led and defined by workers in their geographic context, and connected digitally over Slack and in collaborative training sessions on Zoom. Forging networks to stoke mobilizing energy across the industry is central to the alt-labor organization, which organizer Simone Robutti described in a 2023 interview as taking on "the role of an eco-systemic curator."[91] Reflecting on TWC as a launchpad, Robutti refers to a recent retrospective event which sought to hear from former members: "some of them went on to build very interesting stuff, like the Alphabet Workers Union. There, TWC fulfilled its purpose."[92]

AWU-CWA went public in January 2021 as a wall-to-wall, pre-majority union, open to all Alphabet workers in the US and Canada.[93] The interrelated structural forms navigate the distinct challenges of building sustainable institutions of worker power that allude traditional unions. Organizing wall-to-wall tackles the "two-tier" system, which separates the Temps, Vendors, and Contractors (TVCs)—who make up almost half of the workforce—from the employment protections and famed perks offered to Full-Time Employees (FTEs). Such infrastructural

divisions, increasingly common in the tech landscape to shirk responsibility, save costs, and stymie worker organizing, also further entrench structural inequalities across roles, as highlighted by AWU president Parul Koul who first joined Google as a software engineer on a one-year contract and began organizing as her concerns grew that fixed-term contracts "could be disproportionately offered to candidates from underrepresented communities."[94] The ongoing campaign "Every Google Worker" highlights interventions where divisive strategies can be hacked to build solidarity. A companion to the yearly feedback survey sent to FTEs only, AWU members used the internal on-corp email to reach out to "nearly 26,000 of the estimated 50,000 US based vendors" in an effort to make visible "Alphabet's US shadow workforce."[95]

The breadth of membership is enabled by their pre-majority status: a choice informed not only by the sheer scale and "densely networked structure" of the workplace—how to reach the 80,000 majority or divide them into meaningfully distinct units—but also particular security issues: "Google can monitor everything you say, which means you have to reorient your approach to be security safe with being public."[96] Contending with an employer who is also a behemoth of surveillance capitalism, the union leveraged the dynamics of the information economy, openly organizing to undercut Google's data power. Another timing consideration was the decompositional tech turnover: Organizers noted many people leave in early January due to the bonus payment schedule and hoped the announcement might convince some to stay for the struggle.[97] With 250 members at launch and roughly 1,400 at the time of writing, building AWU in public is pitched as meeting the task of creating a formal infrastructure to sustain worker energy head on. The investment in cultivating bottom-up organizing knowledge is also seen as a movement-building tactic embracing turnover. Since many current members will soon be at another company, former secretary Chris Schmidt noted "that gives us a way to diffuse the model we're developing throughout the broader industry."[98]

Circulating wider struggles in diffusing organizing experience has also seen a marked investment in worker-led forums to archive actions in the industry, share news, and exchange ideas. Analyzing food platform strikes, Jamie Woodcock and Callum Cant note the historical practice of producing bulletins and newspapers to document, inform, and proliferate struggles, literature defined by the "attempt to articulate the political 'leap' from the everyday confrontation and antagonism of capitalist production into a broader process of class struggle."[99] For example, *Collective Action in Tech* began as a project to create a publicly accessible archive of protest, driven by the "idea that tech workers—and not media or management—should define the tech workers movement."[100] The ambitions have grown with the movement, now pursuing multiple strategies to "strengthen the ecosystem," including the production of guides on common issues—such as "DMs Open" with practical tips for remote organizing—and the Embedded Organizers program.[101] Such aggregation sites are also platforms to reach workers in crisis, like in the brutal Musk Twitter takeover. A "Layoff Guide" produced "by Tweeps for Tweeps," distributed on *Collective Action* and overlapping channels in the ecosystem, detailed advice ranging from surveillance and data security to mutual care and establishing networks on encrypted services.[102] While the campus and the incubator encourage an entrepreneurial "disruptor" whose unfettered access is at the expense of other publics and other workers, antagonisms brewing in tech worker organizing are surely stoked by the uncertainties of the interregnum: by the seemingly limitless expansion of their employers across data publics, platforms, and urban space, and the use of their labor to do so, just as the chaos at Twitter underscored that even the most privileged workers are disposable. The potential terrains of conflict intersect across the workplace/campus, to the gentrified city, and the Internet, in struggles over the ethical values of tech.

Nowhere: Not Safe for Work

TWC has stressed the class compositional potential in forging alliances between the workers who build platforms and those whose labor is organized through platforms, usually couched in terms of supply chains, logistics, and the contemporary image of a gig worker (e.g. Uber drivers).[103] But platforms mediate work in many varied and non-linear ways beyond those whose gig is dictated by an app, including the content creators, artists, and other cultural workers whose labors are (at least partially) managed online in more fluid relations to the app(s). And what of sex workers, whose labor built and popularized platforms, who innovated ways to turn a profit but are now excluded from the "great leveler" of digitally afforded, informal income? Danielle Blunt of the Hacking//Hustling collective, at the intersection of tech and social justice, explained the name as reflecting the everyday practices of sex work, "both a hack of a system and the hustle of survival to expand the choices we have": hacking the nine-to-five and hustling not just for the next gig but to provide community care denied by the state.[104] What forms of solidarity, and visions of the future, are incubated when the foundation of expertise is expanded?

The relation of the Internet to the consumption of erotic content is often jokingly discussed in terms of the almost unlimited access to free porn; as the colloquial rule 34 of the Internet states, "if it exists, there is porn of it. No exceptions." The relation is much deeper, however. I now turn the focus to platform work as placed between hyper visibility and invisibility. Reflecting upon the study of digital place, as new technologies augment and layer the constitution and constitutive bounds of place, Cresswell refers to the algorithmic sorting of Google Maps search results as opaquely stratifying and hierarchizing attention. Much as "the landscape directs our attention in socially coded ways," ultimately "invisibility in software is reflected in invisibility in place."[105] Sex workers have long straddled this line, working to be visible enough to earn while evading surveillance and policing. The

enclosures in the decentralized online marketplace are posed by MacLeod as a "stark example of what can happen when the social mobility of a working class which had access to anarchic space is prohibited by the carceral state."[106] I must note, in reference to my use of the term "sex work," that this is a broad umbrella encompassing a variety of exchanges involving erotic labor, including prostitution, BDSM services, sugar babying, and camming. Not every individual involved in the sex trade identifies with this term, which intersects with distinct stigmas faced across the sector, referred to as a "whorearchy": I point to femi babylon's explication of the many power differentials reproduced in a discursive landscape that privileges whiteness, wealth, and respectability.[107] One must sit with the thorny questions of extraction in academic engagement with sex work, in drawing upon a vast and varied pool of knowledge and experience to produce research within an institutional sphere that continues to exclude the community; I use the imperfect term here to stress the labor and class claims of sex work as work—and often, also, antiwork.

Displacing Communal, Criminalized, Feminized Innovation

The claim that "sex workers built the internet" is more than a rhetorical rallying cry, but a reclamation and reinsertion of the work of feminized, criminalized, and ultimately communal labors to the historical record. As Livia Foldes—cofounder and creative director of the tech justice group Decoding Stigma—writes on her website bearing the title, this statement is an invitation to listen, learn, and support a community "most intimately familiar with the internet's contradictions, and who are doing transformational work to make it more just for everyone."[108] Sex workers must constantly innovate hacks in hostile conditions, but are a community consistently marginalized in—or violently excluded from—institutional labor and feminist movements.[109] Zahra Stardust, Gabriella Garcia, and Chibundo

Egwuatu note that sex work has provided material support for infrastructure, built audiences, and stimulated technical improvements in the provision of erotic content, pioneering profitability long before the mainstream, only to be shut out.[110]

Across the 1990s, it was not just media companies like Playboy or Hustler diversifying from print media who invested in internet technologies for erotic content, but individual sex workers who developed subscription sites and video streaming, works of creative disruption outside of the formal arrangements of capital. The women are described by Foldes as stressing the "independence and flexibility their self-owned platforms afforded them, citing benefits that would come to define the upsides of online work, decades before most workers experienced them."[111] The Internet offered the potential for a marginalized community to circumvent the carceral state, a tool for greater control of working conditions "to gain autonomy, financial security, and safety."[112] However, this is a community always acutely aware of the dangers in technological affordances that can be used to extend surveillance, theft, and censorship. The devaluation of sexual labor to the enrichment of (white, cis) male-coded tech culture, where companies such as MindGeek profit from "highly visible, mass-scale content piracy on porn aggregator sites," rests upon a history of stolen content and unpaid labor.[113] As a handful of companies have come to dominate the Internet agora, the supposed apolitical goal of providing a safe and clean digital public, aided by anti-sex work policy, facilitates digital gentrification. The historical casting of sex workers as "vectors of disease" is mapped onto the digital sphere, evoking another incubation metaphor, as reducing risk of infection. I begin from this recognition of past and present hacks and setbacks to center the possibilities of otherwise, and in this incubational moment to heed Garcia's words, "to Big Tech, the sex worker is as indispensable as they are disposable."[114]

As the growth of monopoly platforms structures the interface, social interactions, and money-making potentials online, creators of content are increasingly subject

to the whims of a workplace that wields the surveillance power and disciplinary action of an employer but with no accountability to the worker. Online sex workers, beyond being paid for an exchanged service—whether a scene, dance, sexual act, video, stream, etc.—must also perform labors of self-branding across social media, creating relations with consumers and producers, building diverse income streams, and maintaining channels of community vital in a hostile work-life place.[115] The cultural imperative to find fulfilment in work is discussed by Stardust in relation to discourses of "authenticity" in porn performance, as reifying the extractive devaluation of sex work specifically and gendered labors in general, since "the idea that anyone can build a career that is both income-generating and personally meaningful is a projection of privilege that ignores the fundamentally unequal division of labour."[116] The unequal labors—and rewards—are outlined by Brooke Erin Duffy, Annika Pinch, Shruti Sannon, and Megan Sawey in an ecological account of the "nested precarities" in aspirational, platformized creative work. On top of the fickle market and industry that has always marked cultural work, platforms themselves introduce further insecurities through features, algorithms, and community guidelines. The game of maintaining visibility demands producers cater not only to audiences but increasingly to platform companies, whose systems mediating engagement are largely invisible, but whose algorithmic and human moderation punishments map onto existing social inequalities, disproportionately impacting Black, LGBTQ+, ethnic minority, and women creators.[117] Sanitizing sex (work) from platforms extends across these intersections of exclusion. The term "deplatforming sex" was coined by Stephen Molldrem to describe Tumblr's 2018 porn purge, following the discovery of child pornography on the site and subsequent removal from the Apple App Store. A platform faced with deplatforming, one whose user-base and content largely surrounded the circulation of erotic and subcultural media, Tumblr took the step to ban all adult content, shutting sex and sex workers out from a mainstream platform and erasing vast archives of activism, education, self-expression, and bonds of solidarity built by marginalized communities.[118]

In a roundtable discussion on "Deplatforming Sex," Danielle Blunt and Sinnamon Love both spoke to experiences of social and algorithmic stigma in being marked as a "sex worker" across moderated services—whether or not for the exchange of erotic content—such as loss of access to financial payment processors like Paypal, account deletion on AirBnB, shadowbans on social media, and in search results where sex worker researchers may have their academic output filtered out as 18+.[119] Moderation of platform ecologies sustained through user-generated content are often ascribed solely to algorithms, but this black box of curation through computation is also an act of distancing. The "hidden processes" of commercial content moderators described by Sarah Roberts "contribute to the notion of social media, and all its attendant parts, as immaterial and ethereal," whereby the people doing the mentally-taxing, fast-paced, poorly-paid, and subcontracted work are as unseen as practices governing what content is unacceptable, thus invisible: the shadow workforces of Alphabet and beyond.[120] This opacity is perhaps most pronounced in shadowbanning, a form of censorship that users are not notified of, where one can continue to post content, but the account is hidden from other users. A particularly insidious practice of surveillance capitalism, the user still provides revenue to the platform while they are effectively erased. The nontransparency of the punishment and cross-platform denial leaves no recourse, and knowledge-sharing is crucial in the Sisyphean task of gaming a moderation system trained to exclude nudity and sexual content—which Caroline Are describes in an autoethnography of "automated powerlessness" as an "exclusion from public life" due to "leaving private companies in charge of public space" and a societal approach to safety that seeks to identify and prevent risk.[121]

The tag Not Safe for Work (NSFW) takes on a new meaning in a post-FOSTA-SESTA Internet, but this has always served as a signal communicating what is suitable for the workplace and what is not. Examining the ascription of risk in sexual labor and expression across digital media cultures, Susanna Paasonen, Kylie Jarrett, and Ben Light discuss the NSFW tag as both a warning and a lure,

which functions by “playfully drawing on and constructing divisions between the practices and spaces of labor and leisure, things considered professional and personal, public and private.”[122] Again, as these distinctions blur beyond recognition, the determinations of value, access, and acceptability—always distributed inequitably—are enforced in the margins and interstices of perceived transparent, open, public online space. The “safety” of NSFW is pitched as in reference to the viewer, but it is the sanctity of the workplace and accompanying script of “safe” behavior that is protected; the label demarcates a separation of sexual content as not to be consumed—or produced—at work. How can workplace safety be assured when workers themselves are deemed the risk? While in the innovation spaces of the incubator, all places become a potential workplace in the incubation of ideas and interactions, the same permeability renders no place for sex work.

Take Over the Platform

In the final section of this article, I point toward sex worker-led organizations, projects, and events which confront policed barriers both on- and offline to highlight recompositional practices as the cycles of struggle shift to encompass the platform. What points of aggregation become visible from the ambivalent everywhere/nowhere of sex (anti)work? The Hacking//Hustling collective define themselves as struggling against violence facilitated through technology to “flip the script and center people in the sex trades as producers of knowledge and expertise in the movement to create safety for our communities without policing.”[123] For instance, the Dis/Organizing toolkit produced by the collective, drawn from research conducted between February and July 2021 with “migrant worker and sex worker-led political formations” as well as “shared learning sessions that bring together cumulative knowledge and experiences,” exemplifies Hacking//Hustling’s practice of elevating sex worker expertise while facilitating the distribution of harm reduction tools, mutual aid, and training to the community.[124]

Offering organizing strategies to "build collectives outside institutions," the toolkit is inspired by the incarcerated prison abolitionist Stevie Wilson, who wrote: "my goal has always been to disorganize the prison, to make it less effective, to deny it what it needs to continue: people, money, and an uninformed and misinformed public."[125] To disorganize, then, is to disrupt the institutions and infrastructures that divide workers for capital's end, while also remaining vigilant to safeguard against efforts to diffuse autonomy through accommodation. Recognizing that workers "pushed into informal economies" often create their own informal systems, the toolkit addresses a range of subjects, from managing difference in movement spaces, to tax compliance, to what tech tools have been integrated—and how—into organizing practice, drawn from research in collaboration with other collectives as well as one-on-one interviews with organizers and group sessions.[126] Refusing places of perceived legibility or legitimacy, the toolkit outlines recompositional strategies in the maintenance of sustainable, inclusive places of mutual support that attend to oppressions across race, class, and gender as well as the differential risks faced across practices under "sex work."

Participatory, peer-led, action research is a central facet of Hacking//Hustling to center sex worker experience and knowledge that does not present a monolithic account. The report *Erased* traces the impact of FOSTA-SESTA on two groups of sex workers, online and street-based workers. An important factor obscured by the muddied waters of moralized concern around coercion are barriers to other forms of labor: The surveyed responses from online sex workers referred to many difficulties such as managing illness and disability, single-parenthood, or full-time enrolment, as well as systemic hurdles like criminal records or lack of formal education. The authors note that for many, sex work as a preferable option "reflected a need for flexibility and an inability or discomfort around sacrificing large amounts of their time for substandard wages."[127] The worker autonomy that sex work can afford is consistently threatened by whorephobic landscapes of criminalization and stigma that further economic and social precarity. The morals of consent do not extend to the material means to survive, never mind thrive.

Recognising the work of sex work is not to seek respectability but, as Stardust has argued, "many of the key tenets of the sex worker movements are based not upon the celebration of work, but upon practical tactics for maximising autonomy in relation to it."[128] Class politics that center sex workers demand a political vision that would uncouple worth from status within the wage-relation.

The negation of sex work as work—whether posed as uniquely exploitative, as undermining the dignity of work, or by reference to illegality—fundamentally constrains the imaginal composition of antiwork: if worth is tethered to work, how can there be liberation beyond employment? In an interview with Berg, babylon discusses their assertion of sex work as antiwork to make more explicit the fundamental struggle as that against capitalism. Describing their experience of erotic labor as "quasi work" since "real work didn't seem to have space for me, or it wanted me to come to work on call or endure racist customers for very little pay and flexibility," babylon holds open the tensions of work/antiwork in seeking to exercise as much freedom as possible through cyclical poverty in a classist, racist, and sexist system. Yet they still find, "my refusal to work while still kind of working is very upsetting to a lot of folks."[129] Juno Mac and Molly Smith invoke WfH in *Revolting Prostitutes* to foreground the articulation of refusal: "naming otherwise invisible or 'natural' structures of gendered labor is central to thinking about how, collectively, to resist or reorder such work."[130]

In an account of the 12-day Occupation of a London church in 1982 by the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP)—"Hookers in the House of the Lord"—WfH co-founder and invited ECP spokeswoman Selma James underlined the recomposition of an anti-racist, anti-sexist feminist subjectivity across waged and unwaged workers: "In making a case against any woman being criminalized for refusing poverty, and in protecting her rights when she is, the Occupation was a moment of power for all women."[131] Framing the action as presenting a fundamental choice between prostitutes and police in a conflict wrought by the State confronts the stigma which encourages women and workers to seek

validation in contrast to the victim/criminal whore, siloing off sex work as a special issue. James stresses the strengths of ECP within the international WfH network and local King's Cross Women's Centre hub, a movement which prioritized autonomy while breaking down separatism across groups, "building networks with other women but keeping tight reins on your own struggle."[132] When an ECP initiative, the Legal Action for Women service, was established at the Women's Centre and police ramped up force targeting the "girls union," they were joined by Black Women for Wages for Housework and Women Against Rape in the Occupation, inspired by the French Collective of Prostitutes-led church occupations of 1975. The "shield" of respectable women's groups was complemented by the use of black masks to ensure anonymity. With arrest rates down during the Occupation, cognizant of looming backlash without media glare, the women refocused their demands on appointing a monitor and meeting with police, MPs, and council services.[133] While they won, James's account also appended a warning on the dangers of feminist careerism.

The report produced by their appointed monitor contained no mention of the Occupation, nor comparative arrest figures to build a case for discrimination, while multiple actors worked to separate prostitutes from the rest of the local residents. When calls from the Camden Women's Committee came, supported by feminist lawyers and antiporn lobbyists, to close Legal Action for Women so they could create a new one—claiming that non-prostitute women would not use a service publicly used (not to mention conceived) by prostitutes—the insidious threat of careerism was laid bare: "What we are witnessing before our very eyes is the process whereby women's struggle is hidden from history and transformed into an industry, jobs for the girls."[134] WfH celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2022, having also coordinated the Global Women's Strike since 2000 across the autonomous organizations, but silent erasures of sex workers from the mainstream women's movement underline the ongoing struggles against separatism and careerist fantasies of liberation.[135] Days before the Women's March on Washington in 2017, after Trump's inauguration, the "unity principles"

guiding the protest were quietly changed from the clear inclusive assertion “we stand in solidarity with sex workers’ right movements” to the coercion-focused and savior-coded “all those exploited by sex and labor.” The outcry on social media prompted a reversal but no public comment, however author and trans activist Janet Mock, the demonstration’s “policy table” member who had authored the original statement continued to speak out. In a Tumblr post she expressed the hope that “every sex worker who has felt shamed by this momentary erasure shows up to their local March and holds the collective accountable to our vast, diverse, complicated realities”; then used her platform at the demonstration, speaking “unapologetically” as “a trans woman-writer-activist-revolutionary of color,” to advocate for the difficult work of building an intersectional, inclusive movement.[136] Confronting reactionary forces in feminism, the choice remained and remains: stand with sex workers or stand with policing powers, both on and offline.

Performing a digital (de)occupation, the sex worker art collective Veil Machine addressed the material consequences and sanitizing spatial strategies of a gentrifying Internet in the virtual arthouse/whore gallery event E-Viction, which lasted for 12 hours on August 21st 2020, self-destructing as the clock struck midnight. Grappling with pandemic-induced restrictions and faced with a digital marketplace that outlawed their labors, E-viction was described as creating a community of resistance: “by engaging on a platform that violates SESTA-FOSTA, visitors and performers alike will engage in a new form of civil disobedience.”[137] Hosting live art and sex performances on a platform built by the collective with a shop and tipping facilities alongside fundraising efforts to pay performers, this protest was also an act of mutual aid and resource distribution in a period of devastating precarity. The platform design replicated a victim of FOSTA-SESTA, the personals section of Craigslist, a nod to the many lost places. In an interview Empress Wu described the interface as deliberately intended to capture the charged frictions of the early 2000s Internet, “when the Internet still seemed like

a wild frontier, without any boundaries or restrictions."[138] The palimpsest of past, present, and future were layered in this protest platform.

As one of many evictions, vice raids, and displacements, E-Viction plays with the ephemerality of the sense of place for sex workers. Seizing the means of destruction, the event celebrated the creative practices of community building to make place in a hostile environment. In an interview, Thea Luce noted the inception of the idea as realizing the similarities between evictions from physical public spaces and those online: "we wanted to take that fear of being shut down into our own hands, dramatize it to turn it into art, and transform it into something that belonged to us."[139] The event critiqued rigid distinctions of coercion and consent informing common-sense approaches to "safety" which function to devalue and deny the labor of sex and the agency of sex workers. As Ana Valens poetically described, the central idea that "sex workers agree to deplatform and censor themselves en masse as a sort of consensual, nonconsent role-play" is both a performance piece on online sex work and an invitation to build sex worker community in the face of digital gentrification.[140] Calling the event a "digital riot," Garcia argues that "designing this project with definitions of eviction and gentrification also pushed the collective to approach the project as spatial planners," in creating an immersive site of discovery that refuses the invisibility of "cleansing" to direct the gaze toward the interstices, alleyways, and backpages.[141] Safety pedaled as an apolitical goal cloaks the financial motivations and violent practices of data extraction and policing on platforms, but in creating a literal site of aggregation Veil Machine force reflection on the invisibilizing of "sanitation" through a celebration of the pleasures of community, support, and solidarity in shared struggle.

As actors vie over hegemonic power in the interregnum, and particularly over the content and money-making relations hosted and governed by platforms, a question that captures past erasures and alternatives, present experience, and future potentials is posed by Decoding Stigma: What would the Internet look like if

it were designed by sex workers? The “cross-institutional coalition of laborers, futurists, advocates, artists, designers, technologists, teachers, and students” focuses upon the liberatory futures possible through tech when ethics in design and research center sexual autonomy.[142] A project helmed by Garcia and Foldes, both of whom are members of the coalition, was recently supported for six months at a cultural incubator in San Francisco, which enabled a sex worker-led design facilitated through a series of workshops hosting space and holding place for those so-often spoken about or over. “Browser Histories” spawned from an event on the history of sex work and technology where participants shared personal “keepsakes” to illustrate positive experiences of technology inspiring “feelings of safety, creativity and community in their individual experiences as sex workers” in a forum not recorded or documented, rather “defined by its ephemeral nature in order to replicate the interstitial space in which the sex worker feels most at home.”[143] Experiencing stigma, exclusion, and violence from so many quarters, where their boundaries are so often crossed that ensuring safety and inclusion is a difficult balancing act, the relationality and fluidity of place is made apparent in the figure of the sex worker.

This event stoked a will to create a more permanent platform to archive the innovation, endurance, and communal endeavors of feminized labor to challenge capital’s narration of tech innovation. The project follows the militant research practices of Decoding Stigma to “reallocate institutional resources (in terms of both money and/or merit) in order to make sure that sex workers are invited, cited, and paid for establishing and supporting knowledge-creation,” thus the incubation provided material means for distribution as well as collective space “established around imagination and play” from which to realize the “freedom to fucking dream.”[144] Not at the service of capital, the innovation space of incubation is repurposed for imagination. The project in development is conceived as a collaborative platform, a “digital commons” that functions both as an archive but also in re-placing, or as Garcia writes “usurping the space” of the archive “to platform stories that are silenced or erased in order to uphold the status quo.”[145]

Reflecting upon the incubation period and the future of their project in an interview with the host C/Change R&D Lab, Foldes and Garcia position it as an ovule from which alliances, resources, and ideas can sprout and spread with material and social support. Imagining one possible future, they see themselves established as "an incubator-style think tank pushing projects into myriad disciplines globally" to elevate "sex worker genius" and "help usher in an era of extraordinary empathy, body autonomy, and ecosexual care."[146] Could this be the work/life place of dreams?

Conclusion: Organizing Dreams

Writing on the crisis (within the interregnum) of the pandemic, as calls to reimagine the "future of work" abound, Zukin underscores the need to question whose vision of the future workplace, city, and society are considered, and in whose interest?[147] Big Tech platforms profited massively in the pandemic, facilitating privatized data infrastructures as well as contactless conveniences supplied by the chains of "essential workers" to those locked down. As mass layoffs sweep the tech industry, impacting both full-time and contract workers, a potential decomposition looms.[148] A "startup surge" has been reported in tech-centric news media, articles citing a Clarify Capital survey of 1,000 laid-off tech workers that found 63% had started their own company and increased their salary.[149] But this stark display of the antagonistic relation between employer and worker also harbors recompositional opportunities. For instance, across a unionization campaign and strike, subcontracted workers at YouTube Music Content operations won potentially far-reaching protections for the industry. When a return-to-office order was issued in February 2023, the AWU argued this was retaliation against the team filing for union recognition. Garnering support for a subcontracted workforce, paid well below the average but expected to bear the costs of working onsite at Google Austin offices, the contractors began their first strike at Google, which included a Valentine's day performance of a joint employer

wedding.[150] While the majority had been hired remotely, many living out of state or sustaining multiple jobs to support living in a pricey city, the workplace was wielded as a disciplinary measure. In March, an NLRB ruling recognised Alphabet as joint employer alongside the subcontractor—thus both accountable—and in April the union was recognised as part of AWU.[151] In February 2024, a year after strike action began, unionized workers learned they had been terminated while testifying to Austin City Council on a resolution calling for Google to negotiate.[152] The work of horizontal organizing across tech, in the face of decompositional tactics such as stonewalling, subcontracting, and layoffs despite massive profits, is ongoing, and researchers of contemporary class must attend to the distinct mobilization formations challenging Big Tech from within.

The enclosures of cyberspace also threaten to spread further as the EARN IT act has been introduced into US Congress for a third time. The Eliminating Abusive and Rampant Neglect of Interactive Technologies Act is again pitched in moral tones as targeting the online spread of child sexual abuse material. The act would further erode Section 230 by extending platform liability for content produced by users, even when the information is encrypted. Encryption is a means of providing secure, private communication and the bill has been decried by workers' rights, digital privacy, human rights, and social justice organizations at each reading, in 2020, 2022, and 2023. In a letter to Congress opposing the bill, the ACLU outlines three broad dangers to civil liberties: incentivizing platforms to "monitor and censor their users' speech"; disincentivizing encryption all together, thereby "exposing the public to abusive commercial and government surveillance practices"; and the expansion of "warrantless government access to private data."[153] At a moment when bodily autonomy is under threat with the rollback of Roe v. Wade and a record amount of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation introduced, including anti-Drag laws, restrictions on gender-affirming surgery, and limits on curricula, the lessons of SESTA-FOSTA must be learned and heeded.[154]

To end on such downbeat tones is not to succumb to pessimism as inevitable, but a return to Gramsci in imploring a Left inquiry informed by "pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will."[155] The morbid symptoms of the interregnum further exclude sex workers, where waning hegemonic control prompts extending surveillance, stigma, and criminalizing of marginalized groups. The antiwork perspective of the network Other Weapons, who seek "life outside of any given parameters," call for the centering of community-based strategies of care and solidarity, skills that sex workers have long practiced, in a recognition that capital will never accommodate autonomy and liberation.[156] Cultural studies in the interregnum must understand in order to co-create strategies of autonomy from communities well-versed in organizing against the state, as Other Weapons call to mind Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's concept of "Planning" based in informal relations of social reproduction, as "the ceaseless experiment with the futurial presence of the forms of life that make such activities possible."[157] This paper was initially conceived in response to a *Lateral* call for papers on "theorizing (in) the interregnum" inviting reflection on the shifting sands and power differentials of the Gramscian invocation, which was made in a time of mainstream Marxist determination while fascism loomed.[158] The Angry Workers of the World have spoken of the structural limits that haunt academic research, where "the problem is the detachment of revolutionary (or at least combative) theory from everyday working-class struggles, which academia reproduces."[159] This article draws on autonomist tenets in articulating class composition in process, but as a largely theoretical endeavor charting threads across two sectors of digital labor—online sex work and tech work—it is somewhat limited by my own professional position, as a precarious "early career" scholar at the early stage of a new research project. The time and resources afforded to urgent, collaborative, participatory research is a struggle to which academia must also be organized. The classed barriers that I can speak to, entering the academy from a working-class background, relate not only to what knowledge, methods, and interlocutors are legitimate, but also the

necessary financial, social, and cultural capital to weather precarity, obscured in the maxim "publish or perish."[160]

The Midnight Notes Collective wrote of "new enclosures" in 1990 and critiqued Marx's analysis of enclosure as a movement toward a universal consciousness: "universal or not, real, living proletarians (that do not live on air) must put their feet some place, must strike from some place, must rest some place, must retreat some place."[161] Speaking in a 2020 interview about Vladimir Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* and the continued relevance of autonomist inquiry, Roggero urged greater emphasis on dreaming: "Just as then, so today, we need to rediscover our ability to dream and to give organized form to that dream."[162] As enclosures across physical and digital public space are pitched around the wonders and dangers of tech, the fostering of innovation or shoring up of safety, militant research can aid in dispelling the everywhere/nowhere work in service of capital and in this incubational moment, to provide a place for the freedom to fucking dream.

Notes

1. Mark King, "A Case for Creativity: Our Internal Incubator," *Medium*, August 5, 2021, https://themarkking.medium.com/a-case-for-creativity-our-internal-incubator-46bfc103976 < https://themarkking.medium.com/a-case-for-creativity-our-internal-incubator-46bfc103976> . ↩

2. Incubators are distinguished from cousins of co-working and accelerators as a site of pooled resources, a place for businesses-in-the-making not (yet) with their own workplace, and a short-term lease to lower the risk. Sean Hacket and David Dilts define the incubator as "a shared office-space facility that seeks to provide its incubatees (i.e.'portfolio-' or 'client-' or 'tenant-companies') with a strategic, value-adding intervention system (i.e. business incubation) of monitoring and business assistance," but stress that beyond a "shared-space office facility, infrastructure and mission statement" it is also a "network of individuals and organizations." Sean M. Hacket and David M. Dilts, "A Systematic Review of Business Incubation Research," *Journal of Technology Transfer* 29, no. 1 (2004): 57, https://doi.org/10.1023/B:JOTT.0000011181.11952.0f. Reviewing definitions in business-oriented academic literature, David Smith and Michael Zhang underline both the tangible and intangible elements of incubation: "Indeed, incubators are much more than facilities and support services: they provide an environment in which new ventures can learn and grow in relative safety, gradually accumulating the confidence

and credibility required for successful and sustainable business." David J. Smith and Michael Zhang, "Introduction: The Evolution of the Incubator Concept," *The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation* 13, no. 4 (2012): 228, https://doi.org/10.5367/ijei.2012.0096 < https://doi.org/10.5367/ijei.2012.0096> . See also, Brendan Galbraith, Rodney McAdam, and Stephen Edward Cross, "The Evolution of the Incubator: Past, Present, and Future," *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management* 68, no. 1 (2021): 265–71, https://doi.org/10.1109/TEM.2019.2905297.

3. Tamara MacLeod, "Cyberwhores of Late Capitalism," *3:AM Magazine*, November 9, 2019, https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/cyberwhores-of-late-capitalism/.

4. Lilly Irani, "Hackathons and the Making of Entrepreneurial Citizenship," *Science, Technology & Human Values* 40, no. 5 (2015): 799, https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243915578486 < https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243915578486> .

5. F-architecture Collaborative, "The Incubator Incubator, the Administration of Leaky Bodies, and Other Labor Pains," *Harvard Design Magazine* 46 (2018): 148, https://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/articles/the-incubator-incubator-the-administration-of-leaky-bodies-and-other-labor-pains/.

6. Homi K. Bhabha "'The Beginning of Their Real Enunciation': Stuart Hall and the Work of Culture," *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (2015), https://doi.org/10.1086/682994; and Homi Bhabha "Foreword: Framing Fanon," in *The Wretched of the Earth,* Frantz Fanon, trans. Philcox (Grove Press, 2004).

7. Nancy Fraser, "American Interregnum," *New Left Review*, April 9, 2021, https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/american-interregnum; and Wolfgang Streeck, "The Post-Capitalist Interregnum: The Old System is Dying, but a New Social Order Cannot Yet Be Born," *Juncture* 23, no. 2 (2016): 68–77, https://doi.org/10.1111/newe.906 < https://doi.org/10.1111/newe.906> .

8. As Nick Srnicek argues, rather than harboring the end of ownership in an "age of access" this rather marks the "concentration of ownership" by companies who are not only monopolizing information but are becoming the "owners of the infrastructures of society." Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Polity, 2017), 92.

9. Helen V. Pritchard and Femke Snelting, eds., *Infrastructural Interactions: Survival, Resistance, and Radical Care* (The Institute for Technology in the Public Interest, 2022), 8, http://titipi.org/pub/Infrastructural_Interactions.pdf.

10. Tim Cresswell, "Place," in *The Sage Handbook of Human Geography,* Vol. 1, ed. Roger Lee, Noel Castree, Rob Kitchin, Victoria Lawson, Anssi Paasi, Chris Philo, Sarah Radcliffe, Susan M. Roberts, and Charles W.J. Withers (Sage, 2014), https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446247617.

11. Heather Berg, "Porn, Work, Place: Beyond the (Set) Shop Floor," *Harvard Design Magazine* 46 (2018): 206.

12. Antonio Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, ed., trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (Lawrence & Wishart, 2003): 275–76. ↩

13. Rune Møller Stahl, "Ruling the Interregnum: Politics and Ideology in Nonhegemonic Times," *Politics and Society* 47, no. 3 (2019): 338, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329219851896 < https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329219851896> . ↩

14. Stahl, "Ruling the Interregnum," 333–60. ↩

15. See chapter 6 of Adam Fejerskov, *The Global Lab: Inequality, Technology and the Experimental Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2022); and Tech Workers Coalition, "The Californian Ideology," *Tech Workers Coalition Learning Club*, accessed on December 19, 2024, https://sites.google.com/view/tech-workers-coalition/topics/the-californian-ideology. ↩

16. Jeremy Gilbert, "This Conjuncture: For Stuart Hall," *New Formations* 96/97 (2019): 34, https://doi.org/10.3898/newf:96/97.editorial.2019 < https://doi.org/10.3898/newf:96/97.editorial.2019> . ↩

17. Steven Vallas and Juliet B. Schor, "What Do Platforms Do? Understanding the Gig Economy," *Annual Review of Sociology* 46 (2020): 274, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054857 < https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054857> . ↩

18. Ash Johnson and Daniel Castro, "Overview of Section 230: What It Is, Why It Was Created, and What It Has Achieved," *Information Technology and Innovation Foundation*, February 22, 2021, https://itif.org/publications/2021/02/22/overview-section-230-what-it-why-it-was-created-and-what-it-has-achieved/ < https://itif.org/publications/2021/02/22/overview-section-230-what-it-why-it-was-created-and-what-it-has-achieved/> . ↩

19. Derek E. Bambauer, "What Does the Day After Section 230 Reform Look Like?," *Brookings*, January 22, 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/what-does-the-day-after-section-230-reform-look-like/ < https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/what-does-the-day-after-section-230-reform-look-like/> ; and Tom Romanoff, "Implications for Changing Section 230," *Bipartisan Policy Center,* March 29, 2022, https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/implications-for-changing-section-230/ < https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/implications-for-changing-section-230/> . ↩

20. Congress.gov. "H.R.1865 – 115th Congress (2017–2018): An act to amend the Communications Act of 1934 to clarify that section 230 of such Act does not prohibit the enforcement against providers and users of interactive computer services of Federal and State criminal and civil law relating to sexual exploitation of children or sex trafficking, and for other purposes," April 11, 2018, https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1865. ↩

21. For the definition of whorephobia, see, "What is Whorephobia," *End Whorephobia*, accessed December 19, 2024, https://www.endwhorephobia.org/. ↩

22. Mary Mazzio, "PSA featuring Seth Meyers, Amy Schumer, Josh Charles, Tony Shaloub and others – SESTA," *YouTube*, January 11, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SB7-uqvnS0&ab_channel=MaryMazzio < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SB7-uqvnS0&ab_channel=MaryMazzio> . The PSA followed a 2017 documentary by the same director, titled "I am Jane Doe." ↩

23. Indeed, the statutes claim that websites have been "reckless" and "done nothing to prevent the trafficking of children and victims of forces, fraud, and coercion." However, Department of Justice memos discussing the federal investigation into Backpage dating from 2012 and 2013 outline extensive cooperation, the first noting the company as "remarkably responsive to law enforcement requests and often takes proactive steps to assist in investigations" as first reported by Christine Biederman, "Inside Backpage.com's Vicious Battle with the Feds," *Wired*, June 18, 2019, https://www.wired.com/story/inside-backpage-vicious-battle-feds/. ↩

24. Jennifer Musto, Mitali Thakor, and Borislav Gerasimov, "Editorial: Between Hope and Hype: Critical Evaluations of Technology's Role in Anti-Trafficking," *Anti-Trafficking Review*, no. 14 (2020), https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201220141 < https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201220141> . ↩

25. Danielle Blunt and Ariel Wolf, *Erased: The Impact of FOSTA-SESTA & the Removal of Backpage* (Hacking//Hustling, 2020), https://hackinghustling.org/erased-the-impact-of-fosta-sesta-2020/; and Feona Attwood, John Mercer, and Clarissa Smith, "Editorial," *Porn Studies* 8, no. 4 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2021.2009658. ↩

26. Angela Jones, "FOSTA: A Transnational Disaster Especially for Marginalized Sex Workers," *International Journal of Gender, Sexuality & Law* 2, no. 1 (2022): 73–99, https://doi.org/10.19164/ijgsl.v2i1.1256 < https://doi.org/10.19164/ijgsl.v2i1.1256> ; and Kendra Albert, "Five Reflections from Four Years of FOSTA/SESTA," *Cardoza Arts & Entertainment Law Journal* (2022), http://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4095115. ↩

27. Gilbert, "This Conjuncture," 9. ↩

28. Doreen Massey and Stuart Hall, "Interpreting the Crisis," *Soundings* 44 (2010): 65, https://doi.org/10.3898/136266210791036791 < https://doi.org/10.3898/136266210791036791> . ↩

29. Patrick Cunninghame, "Mapping the Terrain of Struggle: Autonomous Movements in 1970s Italy," *Viewpoint*, November 1, 2015, https://viewpointmag.com/2015/11/01/feminism-autonomism-1970s-italy/ < https://viewpointmag.com/2015/11/01/feminism-autonomism-1970s-italy/> ; and Neil Gray and Nick Clare, "From Autonomous to Autonomist Geographies," *Progress in Human Geography* 46, no. 5 (2022): 1185–206, https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325221114347. ↩

30. Alberto Toscano, "Factory, Territory, Metropolis, Empire," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 9, no. 2 (2004): 198, https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725042000272834 < https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725042000272834> . ↩

31. For a selection of works, see: Precarias a la Deriva, "Adrift through the Circuits of Feminized Precarious Work," *Feminist Review* 77, no. 1 (2004): 157–61, https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400162; "Home," *Notes from Below*, accessed April 10, 2024, https://notesfrombelow.org/ < https://notesfrombelow.org/> ; and "Home," *Angry Workers of the World*, accessed April 10, 2024, https://www.angryworkers.org/.

32. Mario Tronti, "Lenin in England," *Marxists Internet Archive*, accessed March 24, 2024, https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/it/tronti.htm.

33. Sergio Bologna, "The Theory and History of the Mass Worker in Italy," *Libcom*, November 23, 2011, https://libcom.org/article/theory-and-history-mass-worker-italy-sergio-bologna < https://libcom.org/article/theory-and-history-mass-worker-italy-sergio-bologna> .

34. Joanna Figiel, Stevphen Shukaitis and Abe Walker, "The Politics of Workers' Inquiry," *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization* 14, no. 3 (2014): 307, https://ephemerajournal.org/contribution/politics-workers-inquiry.

35. Cunninghame, "Mapping the Terrain of Struggle."

36. Zerowork, "Introduction: Political Materials #1," *Zerowork*, accessed March 25, 2024, http://zerowork.org/3.1Introduction.html.

37. Lotta Continua, "Take Over the City: Community Struggles in Italy," *Libcom*, January 12, 2006, https://libcom.org/article/take-over-city-community-struggle-italy-lotta-continua < https://libcom.org/article/take-over-city-community-struggle-italy-lotta-continua> . See also, Neil Gray, "Rethinking Italian Autonomist Marxism: Spatial Composition, Urban Contestation, and the Material Geographies of Social Reproduction," *Antipode* 54, no. 3 (2022): 800–24, https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12803 < https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12803> .

38. Anna Curcio, "Marxist Feminism of Rupture," *Viewpoint Magazine*, January 14, 2020, https://viewpointmag.com/2020/01/14/marxist-feminism-of-rupture/. See also, Selma James, *Sex, Race, and Class—The Perspective of Winning: A Selection of Writings, 1952–2011* (PM Press, 2012): 92–101.

39. Selma James, *Our Time is Now: Sex, Race, Class, and Caring for People and Planet* (PM Press, 2021): 204–5.

40. Cristina Morini, "The Feminization of Labour in Cognitive Capitalism," *Feminist Review* 87, no. 1 (2007): 40–59, https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400367 < https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400367> .

41. Precarias a la Deriva, "First Stutterings of 'Precarias a la Deriva,'" *Caring Labor: An Archive*, December 14, 2010, https://caringlabor.wordpress.com/2010/12/14/precarias-a-la-deriva-first-stutterings-of-precarias-a-la-deriva/. Silvia Federici also spoke to the occlusion of reproduction in theorizations of precarious labor and particularly the "lip service" paid to feminist analysis in the largely gender neutral subject of "immaterial labor" in Hardt and Negri's *Multitude*. Silvia Federici, "Precarious Labor: A Feminist

Viewpoint," *In the Middle of a Whirlwind*, accessed December 17, 2024, https://inthemiddleofthewhirlwind.wordpress.com/precarious-labor-a-feminist-viewpoint/ < https://inthemiddleofthewhirlwind.wordpress.com/precarious-labor-a-feminist-viewpoint/> .

42. Wendy Liu, "Technological Development for the Many," *New Socialist*, May 19, 2018, https://newsocialist.org.uk/technological-development-for-the-many/.

43. Wendy Liu, "Tech Workers' Inquiry at The World Transformed," *New Socialist*, October 30, 2018, https://newsocialist.org.uk/tech-workers-inquiry-at-twt/.

44. Larry Page and Sergey Brin, "Founders' IPO Letter," *Alphabet Investor Relations*, accessed December 17, 2024, https://abc.xyz/investor/founders-letters/2004-ipo-letter/.

45. Harry McCracken, "An Exclusive Look Inside Google's In-House Incubator Area 120," *Fast Company,* December 3, 2018, https://www.fastcompany.com/90262791/an-exclusive-look-inside-googles-in-house-incubator-area-120; and Kyle Wiggers, "Area 120, Google's In-House Inclubator, Severely Impacted by Alphabet Mass Layoffs," *Tech Crunch*, January 20, 2023, https://techcrunch.com/2023/01/20/area-120-googles-in-house-incubator-severely-impacted-by-alphabet-mass-layoffs/.

46. Smith and Zhang, "The Evolution of the Incubator Concept," 229.

47. Justin Peters, "How a 1950s Egg Farm Hatched the Modern Startup Incubator," *Wired,* June 28, 2017, https://www.wired.com/story/how-a-1950s-egg-farm-hatched-the-modern-startup-incubator/.

48. Sharon Zukin, *The Innovation Complex: Cities, Tech, and the New Economy* (Oxford University Press, 2020); and Alice Warwick, "Silicon Valley and the Social Media Industry," in *The Sage Handbook of Social Media*, ed. Jean Burgess, Alice Marwick, and Thomas Poell (Sage, 2018): 314–29.

49. Raymond W. Smilor, "Managing the Incubator System: Critical Success Factors to Accelerate New Company Development," *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management* 34, no. 3 (1987): 146–47, https://doi.org/10.1109/tem.1987.6498875 < https://doi.org/10.1109/tem.1987.6498875> .

50. Galbraith, McAdam, and Cross, "The Evolution of Incubator," 3.

51. Andrea Januta, "How US Universities are Priming Studies to be Entrepreneurs," *World Economic Forum*, May 15, 2018, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/05/entrepreneur-101-to-nurture-job-growth-u-s-universities-seed-start-ups < https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/05/entrepreneur-101-to-nurture-job-growth-u-s-universities-seed-start-ups> .

52. Gigi Roggero, *The Production of Living Knowledge: The Crisis of the University and the Transformation of Labor in Europe and North America*, trans. Edna Brophy (Temple University Press, 2011), 61.

53. Roland Berger, "Revisiting the Market for Innovation," *Roland Berger*, January 2019, 2, 6, https://www.rolandberger.com/en/Insights/Publications/How-accelerators-and-incubators-can-reinvent-themselves.html.

54. European Court of Auditors, "Special Report No. 7/2014: Has the ERDF Successfully Supported the Development of Business Incubators?," *European Union*, 7, https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications/SR14_07.

55. Dominik Dellermann, Bujikazs Lipusch, and Philipp Ebel, "The Future of Entrepreneurship: Crowd-Based Incubation," *Social Science Research Network*, March 2017, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3245371 < https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3245371> .

56. Sharon Zukin, "Planetary Silicon Valley: Deconstructing New York's Innovation Complex," *Urban Studies* 58, no. 1 (2021): 100, https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098020951421 < https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098020951421> .

57. Zukin, "Planetary Silicon Valley," 5, emphasis in original.

58. For a critique of the entrepreneurial ethos that capture startup dreams in continuing exploitation, see Ian Wright, "Silicon Valley Startups: Being Evil, Again and Again," *Notes from Below*, March 30, 2018, https://notesfrombelow.org/article/silicon-valley-startups-doing-evil-again-and-again.

59. Julie Wagner and Dan Watch, *Innovation Spaces: The New Design of Work* (Brookings, 2017), 4, emphasis in original, https://www.brookings.edu/research/innovation-spaces-the-new-design-of-work/.

60. Michaela Sheahan, *Spot the Difference: Incubators, Accelerators, and Coworking Spaces* (Hassell, 2020), https://www.hassellstudio.com/uploads/Incubators-accelerators-and-co-working-spaces.pdf.

61. Surabhi Pancholi, Tan Yigitcanlar, and Mirko Guaralda, "Public Space Design of Knowledge and Innovation Spaces: Learnings from Kelvin Grove Urban Village, Brisbane," *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity* 1, no. 13 (2015): 6, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40852-015-0015-7; and Cameron Davis, Ben Safran, Rachel Schaff, and Lauren Yayboke, "Building Innovation Ecosystems: Accelerating Tech Hub Growth," *McKinsey*, February 28, 2023, https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/building-innovation-ecosystems-accelerating-tech-hub-growth/.

62. Wagner and Watch, *Innovation Spaces*, 34–38.

63. LoriAnn Mass quoted in "5 Leading Architects Weigh in on the Future of Work," *Haworth Inc.*, June 27, 2019, https://www.haworth.com/na/en/spark/articles/2019/5-leading-architects-weigh-in-on-the-future-of-work.html.

64. F-architecture, "The Incubator Incubator," 151.

65. Curcio, “Marxist Feminism of Rupture.” ↩

66. Matt Schaefer and Kristen Sheets, “‘A World to Win,’ with Matt Schaefer and Kristen Sheets from the Tech Workers Coalition,” *Logic(s)*, June 9, 2017, https://logicmag.io/tech-against-trump/matt-schaefer-and-kristen-sheets-tech-workers-coalition/. ↩

67. Bryce Covert, “How Kickstarter Employees Formed a Union,” *Wired*, May 27, 2020, https://www.wired.com/story/how-kickstarter-employees-formed-union/. ↩

68. Covert, “Kickstarter Employees.” ↩

69. Ben Tarnoff, “The Making of the Tech Worker Movement,” *Logic(s)*, May 4, 2020, https://logicmag.io/the-making-of-the-tech-worker-movement/full-text/. Google dropped “Don’t be evil” from their code of conduct in 2018. ↩

70. “Never Again Pledge,” neveragain.tech, accessed December 16, 2024, http://neveragain.tech/ < http://neveragain.tech/> . A collective effort of more than 50 tech workers, including people “at increased risk from the upcoming U.S. administration,” the organizers describe the impetus of the pledge as springing from a Bay Area Tech Solidarity meeting, a space with ground rules that include “explicit rejection of ‘tech solutionism’” and commitment that any solutions proposed “should be led by people who are members of the groups the solution is intended to help.” See, “About,” neveragain.tech, https://neveragain.tech/about.html. ↩

71. Tarnoff, “Making of the Tech Worker Movement.” ↩

72. Nathan Sadowski, That Phan, and Meredith Whittaker, “Open Secrets: An Interview with Meredith Whittaker,” in *Economies of Virtue: The Circulation of ‘Ethics’ in AI*, ed. Thao Phan, Jake Goldenfein, Declan Kuch, and Monique Mann (Institute of Network Cultures, 2022): 146–47, https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19267 < https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19267> . See also, Ben Tarnoff, “Tech Workers Versus the Pentagon: An Interview with KIM,” *Jacobin*, June 6, 2018, https://jacobin.com/2018/06/google-project-maven-military-tech-workers. ↩

73. Jason Prado in Liu, “Tech Workers’ Inquiry”; and Noam Scheiber and Kate Conger, “The Great Google Revolt,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/02/18/magazine/google-revolt.html. ↩

74. Tarnoff, “Tech Workers versus the Pentagon.” ↩

75. See Patrick Tucker, “Google is Pursuing the Pentagon’s Giant Cloud Contract Quietly, Fearing an Employee Revolt,” *Defense One*, April 12, 2018, https://www.defenseone.com/technology/2018/04/google-pursuing-pentagons-giant-cloud-contract-quietly-fearing-employee-revolt/147407/; and Lee Fang, “Leaked Emails Show Google Expected Lucrative Military Drone AI Work to Grow Exponentially,” *The Intercept*, May 31, 2018, https://theintercept.com/2018/05/31/google-leaked-emails-drone-ai-pentagon-lucrative/. ↩

76. Sadowski, Phan, and Whittaker, “Open Secrets,” 147. ↩

77. Daisuke Wakabayashi and Katie Banner, "How Google Protected Andy Rubin, the 'Father of Android,'" *New York Times*, October 25, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/technology/google-sexual-harassment-andy-rubin.html. See also, Claire Stapleton, Tanuja Gupta, Meredith Whittaker, Celie O'Neil-Hart, Stephanie Parker, Erica Anderson, and Amr Gaber, "We're the Organizers of the Google Walkout. Here are our Demands," *The Cut*, November 1, 2018, https://www.thecut.com/2018/11/google-walkout-organizers-explain-demands.html. ↩

78. Sadowski, Phan, and Whittaker, "Open Secrets," 147. ↩

79. Evan Calder Williams, "Invisible Organization: Reading Romano Alquati," *Viewpoints Magazine*, August 26, 2013, https://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/26/invisible-organization-reading-romano-alquati/. ↩

80. Clarissa Redwine, "Clarissa Redwine: A Tech Worker's Story," *The Tech Worker Handbook*, last modified January 1, 2020, https://techworkerhandbook.org/stories/clarissa-redwine/. ↩

81. Caroline O'Donavan, "Google Exec's Internal Email on its Data Leak Policy has Rattled Employees,"*Buzzfeed News*, May 14, 2019, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/carolineodonovan/google-execs-internal-email-on-data-leak-policy-rattles < https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/carolineodonovan/google-execs-internal-email-on-data-leak-policy-rattles> . In August, new communication guidelines were introduced to limit debate on politcal issues and company policy, see Shirin Ghaffary, "Google is Cracking Down on its Employee's Political Speech at Work," *Vox*, August 23, 2019, https://www.vox.com/recode/2019/8/23/20829430/google-new-community-guidelines-employees-political-speech-internal-debate. Then in November, Google announced it was scaling back the weekly all-hands "TGIF" town hall meetings, once pitched as ensuring transparency and an opportunity to engage with executives. See Colin Lecher, "Google is Scaling Back its Weekly All-Hands Meetings after Leaks, Sundar Pichai Tells Staff," *The Verge*, November 15, 2019, https://www.theverge.com/2019/11/15/20966718/google-weekly-all-hands-tgif-staff-meeting-changes-ceo-sundar-pichai. ↩

82. RV Dougherty quoted in Katie Malone, "Inequity, Pay Disparities, and Insecurity: Inside the Rise of Tech Unions,"' *CIO Dive*, June 10, 2021, https://www.ciodive.com/news/technology-IT-unions-labor-workforce-disparity/601323/. ↩

83. "About Us," *Tech Workers Union Local 1010*, accessed December 19, 2024, https://www.techworkersunion-1010.org/about-us. ↩

84. Ben Tarnoff and Nataliya Nedzhvetskaya, "The Making of the Tech Worker Movement: A 2021 Update," *Collective Action in Tech*, January 07, 2021, https://collectiveaction.tech/2021/the-making-of-the-tech-worker-movement-2021/. ↩

85. Nick Dyer-Witheford, "Cybernetics and the Making of a Global Proletariat," *The Political Economy of Communications* 4, no. 1 (2016): 53. ↩

86. Moira Weigel, "Coders of the World, Unite," *The Guardian*, October 31, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/oct/31/coders-of-the-world-unite-can-silicon-valley-workers-curb-the-power-of-big-tech < https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/oct/31/coders-of-the-world-unite-can-silicon-valley-workers-curb-the-power-of-big-tech> ; and Enda Brophy and Seamus Grayer, "Platform Organizing: Tech Worker Struggles and Digital Tools for Labour Movements," in *The Gig Economy: Workers and Media in the Age of Convergence*, ed. Brian Dolber, Michelle Rodino-Colocino, Chenjerai Kumanzika, and Todd Wolfson (Routledge, 2021). ↩

87. Organizer Jason Prado noted the strategic position when union organizers are not permitted on the tech campus workplace: "as a full time employee, with a badge that lets me go where I want, I *can*. I can hand out surveys and make clear that I, as a full-time employee, support their labor struggles." Liu, "Tech Workers' Inquiry at the World Transformed." ↩

88. Valentin Niebler, "Coalitional Power in the Digital Economy," in *Trajectories of Platform Capitalism and Platform Work* (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2023): 11–12, https://doi.org/10.18452/28046. ↩

89. Tech Workers Coalition, "Tech Workers, Platform Workers, and Workers' Inquiry," *Notes from Below*, March 30, 2018, https://notesfrombelow.org/article/tech-workers-platform-workers-and-workers-inquiry. ↩

90. R.K. Upadhya, "Looking Back," *Notes from Below*, June 8, 2019, https://notesfrombelow.org/article/looking-back. ↩

91. Simone Robutti quoted in Gianmarco Cristofari, "The State of the Tech Workers Global Movement – Interview with Simone Robutti," *Institute of Network Cultures*, November 16, 2023, https://networkcultures.org/blog/2023/11/16/tech-workers-global-movement/. ↩

92. Robutti in Cristofari, "The State of Tech Workers Global Movement." ↩

93. Parul Koul and Chewy Shaw, "We Built Google. This Is Not the Company We Want to Work For," *New York Times*, January 4, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/04/opinion/google-union.html < https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/04/opinion/google-union.html> . The announcement positioned the union as holding Google accountable to employees, users, and communities: "Its motto used to be 'Don't be Evil.' We all live by that motto." Sidney Rothenstein highlighted AWU as "illustrating how the tactic of recoding can be used effectively in order to build real working class power" in an interview with *Digilabor*, "Organizing Tech Workers and Recoding Power," September 9, 2022, https://digilabour.com.br/organizing-tech-workers-and-recoding-power-interview-with-sidney-rothstein/. ↩

94. Parul Koul quoted in Katherine Schwab, "How Parul Koul and the Alphabet Workers Union Created an Untraditional Union to Hold the Tech Giant Accountable," *Fast Company*, August 10, 2021, https://www.fastcompany.com/90651876/most-creative-people-2021-parul-koul. See also, Julia Carrie Wong, "Revealed: The 'Two-Tier' Workforce Training Document," *The Guardian*, December 12, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/dec/11/google-tvc-full-time-employees-training-document. ↩

95. Alphabet Workers Union, "Every Google Worker: An Examination of Alphabet's US Shadow Workforce," accessed April 10, 2024, https://everygoogleworker.alphabetworkersunion.org/#keyfindings. ↩

96. Chis Schmidt quoted in Ike McKeery, "Pre-Majority Unionism: Alphabet Workers Union," *Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee*, February 15, 2024, https://workerorganizing.org/premajority-unionism/case-studies/alphabet-workers-union/. ↩

97. Christopher Schmidt and Honey Rosenbloom,"Now I Know My ABCs: A Conversation with Two Organizers from the Alphabet Workers Union," *Logic(s),* May 17, 2021, https://logicmag.io/distribution/now-i-know-my-abcs-a-conversation-with-two-organizers-from-the-alphabet/. ↩

98. Schmidt and Rosenbloom, "Now I Know My ABCs." ↩

99. Callum Cant and Jamie Woodcock, "The Cycle of Struggle: Food Platform Strikes in the UK 2016–18," in *The Gig Economy: Workers and Media in the Age of Convergence*, ed. Brian Dolber, Michelle Rodino-Colocino, Chenjerai Kumanzika, and Todd Wolfson (Routledge, 2021), 261. ↩

100. "Support Our Effort to Build the Next Phase of the Tech Workers Movement," *Collective Action in Tech*, February 7, 2022, https://collectiveaction.tech/2022/support-our-effort-to-build-the-next-phase-of-the-tech-workers-movement/. ↩

101. Emily Mazo, JS Tan, Clarissa Redwine, and Kristen Sheets, "DMs Open," *Collective Action in Tech*, July 2022, https://collectiveaction.tech/2022/dms-open/; and "Embedded Organizer Collective," *Collective Action in Tech*, accessed December 17, 2024, https://collectiveaction.tech/organize/. ↩

102. "A Layoff Guide," *Collective Action in Tech*, November 2, 2022, https://collectiveaction.tech/2022/a-layoff-guide-for-tweeps/. The guide was also distributed as issue 16 of the TWC newsletter. The newsletter is an email communique with the expressed aim to "help situate the tech industry within the broader social, political and economic context" whose founders hope "will help build understanding and solidarity across roles and companies." See, "About the Tech Workers Coalition Newsletter," *Tech Workers Coalition*, accessed December 17, 2024, https://news.techworkerscoalition.org/about/. ↩

103. Tech Workers Coalition, "Tech Workers, Platform Workers, and Workers' Inquiry." ↩

104. Danielle Blunt and Zahra Stardust, "Automating Whorephobia: Sex, Technology, and the Violence of Deplatforming, An Interview with Hacking//Hustling," *Porn Studies* 8, no. 4 (2021): 352, https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2021.1947883.

105. Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 149–50.

106. MacLeod, "Cyberwhores of Late Capitalism."

107. femi bablyon, *Heauxthots: On Terminology, and other (Un)Important Things* (Bbydoll Press, 2019). Also available under their former name, suprihmbé, "heauxthots: Defined/Definers: My Thought on Common Terminology around Erotic Labor & Trafficking," *Medium*, September 10, 2019, https://medium.com/heauxthots/heauxthots-de%EF%AC%81ned-de%EF%AC%81ners-my-thoughts-on-common-terminology-around-erotic-labor-trafficking-f9df45ea2b9a < https://medium.com/heauxthots/heauxthots-de%EF%AC%81ned-de%EF%AC%81ners-my-thoughts-on-common-terminology-around-erotic-labor-trafficking-f9df45ea2b9a> . See also, STELLA, "Language Matters: Talking about Sex Work," *Global Network of Sex Work Projects*, July 2, 2013, https://www.nswp.org/resource/member-publications/language-matters-talking-about-sex-work < https://www.nswp.org/resource/member-publications/language-matters-talking-about-sex-work> .

108. Livia Foldes, ed., "Sex Workers Built the Internet," accessed March 20, 2024, https://sexworkersbuilttheinter.net/.

109. Blunt and Stardust, "Automating Whorephobia," 365.

110. Zahra Stardust, Gabriella Garcia, and Chibundo Egwuatu, "What Can Tech Learn from Sex Workers," *Medium*, December 16, 2020, https://medium.com/berkman-klein-center/what-can-tech-learn-from-sex-workers-8e0100f0b4b9 < https://medium.com/berkman-klein-center/what-can-tech-learn-from-sex-workers-8e0100f0b4b9> . See also Melissa Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore* (Verso, 2014).

111. Foldes, "Sex Workers Built the Internet."

112. Blunt and Wolf, *Erased*, 5. See also, Hanna Barakat and Elissa M. Redmiles, "Community Under Surveillance: Impacts of Marginalisation on an Online Labour Forum," *Proceedings of the 16th International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* 16 (2022), https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/74zw2 < https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/74zw2> .

113. Susanna Paasonen, Kylie Jarrett, and Ben Light, *NSFW: Sex, Humor, and Risk in Social Media* (MIT Press, 2019), 73.

114. Chibundo Egwuatu, Yin Q, Gabriella Garcia, and Zahra Stardust, "Decoding Stigma: Designing For Sex Worker Liberatory Futures," *Hacking//Hustling*, April 8, 2021, https://hackinghustling.org/event-decoding-stigma-designing-for-sex-worker-liberatory-futures/.

115. Heather Berg, "A Scene is just a Marketing Tool: Alternative Income Streams in Porn's Gig Economy," *Porn Studies* 3, no. 2 (2016): 160–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2016.1184478. ↩

116. Zahra Stardust, "From Amateur Aesthetics to Intelligible Orgasms; Pornographic Authenticity and Precarious Labour in the Gig Economy," *About Gender: International Journal of Gender Studies* 8, no. 16 (2019): 22, https://doi.org/10.15167/2279-5057/AG2019.8.16.1115 < https://doi.org/10.15167/2279-5057/AG2019.8.16.1115> . Duffy has proposed the term "aspirational labour" in an investigation of social media producers which illuminates the gendered dynamics of a romanticized vision of work as passion. See Erin Brooke Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender and Aspirational Labor in the Social Media Economy* (Yale University Press, 2017). ↩

117. Brooke Erin Duffy, Annika Pinch, Shruti Sannon, and Megan Sawey, "The Nested Precarities of Creative Labour on Social Media," *Social Media & Society* 7, no. 2 (2021) https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211021368 < https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211021368> . ↩

118. Stephen Molldrem, "Tumblr's Decision to Deplatform Sex Will Harm Sexually Marginalized People," *Wussy*, December 6, 2018, https://www.wussymag.com/all/tumblrs-decision-to-deplatform-sex-will-harm-sexually-marginalized-people. ↩

119. Danielle Blunt, Stefanie Duguay, Tarleton Gillespie, Sinnamon Love, and Clarissa Smith, "Deplatforming Sex: A Roundtable Conversation," *Porn Studies* 8, no. 4 (2021): 420–38, https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2021.2005907 < https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2021.2005907> . See also, Zahra Stardust, Danielle Blunt, Gabriella Garcia, Lorelei Lee, Kate D'Adamo, and Rachel Kuo, "High Risk Hustling: Payment Processors Sexual Proxies and Discrimination by Design," *City University of New York Law Review* 26, no. 1 (2023). ↩

120. Sarah T. Roberts, "Aggregating the Unseen," in *Pics or It Didn't Happen: Images Banned from Instagram*, ed. Arvida Byström and Molly Soda (Prestel, 2016), 18–19. ↩

121. Carolina Are, "An Autoethnography of Automated Powerlessness: Lacking Platform Affordances in Instagram and TikTok Account Deletions," *Media, Culture & Society* 19, no. 1 (2022): 8, < https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221140531.%C2%A0> https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221140531. Danielle Blunt, Ariel Wolf, Emily Coombes, and Shanelle Mullin, *Posting into the Void: Studying the Impact of Shadowbanning on Sex Workers and Activists* (Hacking//Hustling, 2020), 16, https://hackinghustling.org/posting-into-the-void-content-moderation/. ↩

122. Paasonen, Jarrett, and Light, *NSFW,* 6. ↩

123. "About," *Hacking//Hustling*, accessed March 22, 2024, https://hackinghustling.org/. ↩

124. Rachel Kuo and Lorelei Lee, *Dis/Organizing: How We Build Collectives Beyond Institutions — A Non-Comprehensive Community Toolkit and Report* (Hacking//Hustling, 2021), 3, https://hackinghustling.org/research-2/disorganizing-toolkit/ < https://hackinghustling.org/research-2/disorganizing-toolkit/> ; and

"Dis/Organizing Toolkit," *Hacking//Hustling*, accessed December 20, 2024, https://hackinghustling.org/research-2/disorganizing-toolkit/ < https://hackinghustling.org/research-2/disorganizing-toolkit/> .

125. Stevie Wilson, "Dis-Organizing Prisons," *Dreaming Freedom, Practicing Abolition*, December 5, 2019, https://abolitioniststudy.wordpress.com/2019/12/05/dis-organizing-prisons-by-stevie-wilson/.

126. Kuo and Lee, *Dis/Organizing*, 2.

127. Blunt and Wolf, *Erased*, 16.

128. Zahra Stardust and Helen Hester, "Sex Work, Autonomation and the Post-Work Imaginary," *Autonomy*, September 13, 2021, https://autonomy.work/portfolio/sexwork-postwork/ < https://autonomy.work/portfolio/sexwork-postwork/> .

129. femi babylon and Heather Berg, "Erotic Labor Within and Without Work: An Interview with femi babylon," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 3 (2021): 634, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-9154955 < https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-9154955> .

130. Juno Mac and Molly Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* (Verso, 2018).

131. James, *Sex, Race, and Class*, 112.

132. Ibid., 117. James elaborates that this "hard-won clarity" has "enabled prostitute women to choose and train nonprostitutes to be the public voice, wherever necessary, of illegals who cannot be public."

133. The meetings were demanded to hold accountable state organizations who would decry sex work but do nothing to improve material conditions: "it was about time that those who professed to be against prostitution put their money, their social services, and their housing, where their mouth was." Ibid., 125.

134. Ibid., 128.

135. See "Home," *Global Women's Strike*, accessed April 13, 2024, https://globalwomenstrike.net/.

136. Alanna Vagianos, "Janet Mock: Sex Workers' Rights Must be Part of the Women's March," *HuffPost*, January 18, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/janet-mock-sex-workers-rights-must-be-part-of-the-womens-march_n_587f798ae4b01cdc64c8a16d. Mock has since deleted Tumblr, but the post can be found at "On the Women's March 'Guiding Mission' and its Inclusion of Sex Workers," *From a Red Shoe*, Tumblr post, January 22, 2017, https://esjottvau.tumblr.com/post/156216718565/on-the-womens-march-guiding-vision-and-its < https://esjottvau.tumblr.com/post/156216718565/on-the-womens-march-guiding-vision-and-its> . Janet Mock, "I Am My Sister's Keeper: Read My Women's March on Washington Speech," *Janet Mock*, accessed April 13, 2024, https://janetmock.com/2017/01/21/womens-march-speech/.

137. Veil Machine, "E-Viction (2020)," *Veil Machine*, accessed April 17, 2024, https://veilmachine.com/E-Viction < https://veilmachine.com/E-Viction> .

138. Lena Chen, "Sex Work and Performance as Virtual Resistance: In Conversation with Veil Machine," *Public Parking*, March 22, 2022, http://thisispublicparking.com/posts/sex-work-and-performance-as-virtual-resistance-in-conversation-with-veil-machine.

139. Chen, "Sex Work and Performance."

140. Ana Valens, "'E-viction' Sex Work Event Sheds Light on 'Digital Gentrification' by Self-Destructing when it's Over," *Daily Dot*, October 20, 2020, https://www.dailydot.com/irl/sex-work-e-viction-digital-gentrification/.

141. Gabriella Garcia, "You Have Fallen in Love with A Whore," *Dirty Furniture Magazine*, 2021. See also, Gabriella Garcia, "The Cybernetic Sex Worker," *Substack*, December 16, 2021, https://decodingstigma.substack.com/p/cybernetic-sex-worker.

142. "Home," *Decoding Stigma*, accessed April 13, 2024, https://decodingstigma.tech/.

143. Gabriella Garcia, "Can We Create a Sex Worker Imaginarium?," *Substack*, September 21, 2022, https://decodingstigma.substack.com/p/can-we-create-a-sex-worker-imaginarium.

144. Garcia, "Sex Worker Imaginarium"; and Gabriella Garcia, "Sex Worker-Led Design Report: We Believe In the Freedom to Fucking Dream," *Substack*, March 30, 2023, https://decodingstigma.substack.com/p/sex-worker-led-design-report-we-believe.

145. Garcia, "Sex Worker-Led Design Report."

146. Gabriella Garcia and Livia Foldes, "Browser Histories," *C/Change*, accessed April 13, 2024, https://cchange.xyz/project/browser-histories/ < https://cchange.xyz/project/browser-histories/> .

147. Zukin, "Planetary Silicon Valley."

148. Jack Turner, "Tech Companies That Have Made Layoffs in 2023," *Tech.co*, May 18, 2023, https://tech.co/news/tech-companies-layoffs.

149. "Launching a Company Post Layoff," *Clarify Capital*, last modified October 23, 2023, https://clarifycapital.com/from-fired-to-founder < https://clarifycapital.com/from-fired-to-founder> ; Amanda Hoover, "Tech Layoffs are Feeding a New Startup Surge," *Wired*, Febraruy 22, 2023, https://www.wired.com/story/tech-layoffs-are-feeding-a-new-startup-surge/; and Steve Taplin, "Why Tech Layoffs Fueling People to Become Entrepreneurs," *Forbes*, May 8, 2023, https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2023/05/08/why-tech-layoffs-fueling-people-to-become-entrepreneurs/.

150. Alphabet Workers Union-CWA, "Google and Cognizant Joint Employer Wedding," *YouTube*, February 17, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SR7j1UvcAWM.

151. Ashley King, "YouTube Music Contractors Win Major Union Battle Against Alphabet," *Digital Music News,* April 30, 2023, https://www.digitalmusicnews.com/2023/04/30/youtube-music-contractors-union-battle-alphabet/ < https://www.digitalmusicnews.com/2023/04/30/youtube-music-contractors-union-battle-alphabet/> ; and "YouTube Music Content Operations Team," *Alphabet Workers Union*, accessed December 19, 2024, https://www.alphabetworkersunion.org/campaigns/youtube-music-content-operations. ↩

152. "Press Release: Google Lays Off Union Workers at YouTube Music," *Alphabet Workers Union*, February 28, 2024, https://www.alphabetworkersunion.org/press/google-lays-off-union-workers-at-youtube-music. ↩

153. Christopher Anders, Jenna Leventoff, and Cody Venzke, "ACLU Letter Opposing EARN IT Act, STOP CSAM Act, and Cooper Davis ACT," *ACLU*, May 3, 2023, https://www.aclu.org/documents/aclu-letter-opposing-earn-it-act-stop-csam-act-and-cooper-davis-act. ↩

154. Annette Choi, "Record Number of anti-LGBTQ Bills Have Been Introduced This Year," *CNN*, April 6, 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/06/politics/anti-lgbtq-plus-state-bill-rights-dg/index.html < https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/06/politics/anti-lgbtq-plus-state-bill-rights-dg/index.html> ; and Emma Llansó and Caitlin Vogus, "CDT Leads Broad Civil Society Coalition Urging Senate to Drop EARN IT Act," *Center for Democracy & Technology*, May 2, 2023, https://cdt.org/insights/cdt-leads-broad-civil-society-coalition-urging-senate-to-drop-earn-it-act/. ↩

155. Antonio Gramsci, *Letters from Prison by Antonio Gramsci*, ed., trans. Lynne Lawner (Quartet Books, 1979), 160. ↩

156. Other Weapons, "Sex Workers Against Work," *Other Weapons*, May 26, 2020, https://otherweapons.noblogs.org/. ↩

157. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), 74. ↩

158. "Call for Papers: Cultural Studies in the Interregnum," *Lateral*, accessed December 19, 2024, https://csalateral.org/cfp-cultural-studies-in-the-interregnum/. ↩

159. Angry Workers of the World, "Thought's on 'Workers' Inquiry and Global Class Struggle —Strategies, Tactics, Objectives' edited by Robert Ovetz," *Angry Workers*, December 28, 2020, https://www.angryworkers.org/2020/12/28/thoughts-on-workers-inquiry-and-global-class-struggle-strategies-tactics-objectives-edited-by-robert-ovetz/. ↩

160. Deirdre O'Neill, "It's Not Research: It's Intellectual Activism!," *Journal of Class & Culture* 2, no. 2 (2023): 3–9, https://doi.org/10.1386/jclc_00019_2. ↩

161. Midnight Notes, "Introduction to the New Enclosures*,"Libcom*, July 11, 2023, https://libcom.org/article/introduction-new-enclosures. ↩

162. Gigi Roggero and Davide Gallo Lassere, "'A Science of Destruction': An Interview with Gigi Roggero on the Actuality of Operaismo," *Viewpoint Magazine*, April 30, 2020, https://viewpointmag.com/2020/04/30/a-science-of-destruction-an-interview-with-gigi-roggero-on-the-actuality-of-operaismo/ < https://viewpointmag.com/2020/04/30/a-science-of-destruction-an-interview-with-gigi-roggero-on-the-actuality-of-operaismo/> . ↩

Author Information

Sarah Earnshaw

Sarah Earnshaw is currently a postdoctoral researcher in the DFG project Practicing Place at KU Eichstätt-Ingolstadt working in American and Cultural Studies. She received her PhD in American Cultural History at LMU Munich, which is the basis for her forthcoming book, *Human Rights and Sovereign Standards in US Security: "Freedom Will Be Defended"* (Routledge, 2025), and was a postdoc fellow at the University of California, Berkeley where she was a union steward of UAW 5810. Having entered academia at the University of Glasgow as a first-generation student from a working class background, her ongoing research project on the spatial composition of class struggle - "Knowing Your Place" - reflects her interests in conceptions of freedom and autonomy, labor mobilization, and cultural theory as a tool for resistance.

View all of Sarah Earnshaw's articles.

Article details

Sarah Earnshaw, "The Incubator and the Interregnum: Theorizing the (Work)Places of Class Struggle," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.3

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial

4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Cannaboom: Race and Labor in California Cannabis Cultures

by Curtis Marez | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

ABSTRACT Encouraged by state requirements for prepackaging, Black and Latinx producers and distributors of legal cannabis in California have developed novel, symbolically and socially significant forms of marketing. Black and Latinx cannabis industries have developed their own "commodity aesthetics," using product packaging, live events, and social media to entice buyers with a combination of beautiful sights, smells, textures, signs, and symbols that represent the contradictions of working-class Black and Latinx life in contemporary California. Black and Latinx cannabis popular cultures combine images of freedom and transcendence with depictions of the low wage jobs that many Black and Latinx people work. This is because, rather than an impediment to work, cannabis consumption is a kind of support for or accessory to labor. Many consumers use cannabis to dull the tedium and pain of labor and to sustain them throughout the workday. This essay provides a critical overview of Black and Latinx cannabis marketing in California, and its targeting of working-class consumers of color. While I discuss several examples, my central case study is the successful Black and Latinx cannabis distributor Teds Budz. I draw on interviews, ethnographies of live cannabis events, and visual studies of cannabis packages and social media, arguing that seemingly "escapist" qualities in cannabis culture critically foreground the material limits of the world from which Black and Latinx workers are trying to escape. Cannabis commodity aesthetics, I conclude, promise people of color an exit from the drudgery of work that can also tighten their ties to low wage jobs.

KEYWORDS Black, California, Latinx, cannabis, popular culture, racial capitalism

The sweet, musky smell of burning weed confirmed I was in the right place, an underground cannabis Christmas party in Los Angeles, at a recording studio near Boyle Heights called "The Void" (December 23, 2023). Parked in front was a Black owned taco truck called "All Flavor, No Grease" I'd seen before at similar events.

After passing through security (bag check, pat down), I walked through the chain link fence and into the parking lot, a long line of people snaking out the venue (Figure 1). Except for a handful of white people, including my partner who tagged along, everyone was Black or Latinx. They were also young, with many in their twenties. But as a 60-year-old Chicano, I stand out, even with my scene-appropriate kicks and cannabis-branded hat. One young Black and Latinx couple stopped us to ask about our relationship and history with cannabis. Another patron asked to take my picture, good naturedly bemused to see someone there his grandfather's age. At other events young cannabis enthusiasts have given me cannabis and cannabis swag seemingly for similar reasons. Black and Latinx recreational cannabis cultures in California are relatively intergenerational, including young and old consumers, and older cannabis growers and sellers, such as Cheech and Chong, who are in their seventies and eighties respectively.[1]

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-1.jpeg>

Figure 1. Cannabis consumers wait in line at a food stand in the parking lot of "The Void" in Los Angeles. Photo by author.

Inside, the Void's two large rooms were lined with vendor tables displaying cannabis infused chocolates, boba drinks, beef jerky, and lots of weed (Figure 2). Smoke and street fashion were thick and dank (check out the light halos in the event photos). Several people wore cannabis-themed ugly Christmas sweaters, and one young woman was dressed as an elf while she smoked cannabis concentrates from a glass rig (Figure 3). The main room featured a large boxing ring, which alternated between boxing matches and rap performances, including by Theo Lewis, owner of Teds Budz, the cannabis distribution company I discuss later in this essay .

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-2.jpeg>

Figure 2. A cannabis vender in “The Void.” Photo by author.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-3.jpeg>

Figure 3. A smokey room of cannabis enthusiasts at an underground party in Los Angeles. Photo by author.

Cannabis observers in California distinguish between an illegal “black market” and a legal “white market,” but this event was grey. I would be surprised to learn that the event’s promoters had acquired the appropriate permits for boxing matches, and there didn’t appear to be any medical workers there in case of injury. Moreover, none of the vendors charged sales taxes or cannabis excise taxes as required by state law and hence may not have had a retail permit. Resistance to cannabis sales taxes by working-class Black and Latinx consumers is partly a response to their regressive nature: taxes imposed on cannabis brands marketed to working-class people of color represent a disproportiante burden for those consumers relative to wealthier, white cannabis consumers. Finally, venders used

a mix of legal and illegal packaging. Some displayed pounds of cannabis in large plastic bags the size of office trash can liners, while others sold small, mylar bags filled with 3.5 grams of cannabis as required by law. In contrast with the plain plastic bags, the mylar bags became canvases for art advertising their contents. One vendor even had bags designed to look like abstract paintings in ornate gold frames (Figure 4).

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-4-2.jpg>

Figure 4. Cannabis package in the form of a framed painting. Photo by author.

Encouraged by state requirements for prepackaging, Black and Latinx producers and distributors of legal cannabis in California have developed novel, symbolically and socially significant forms of marketing. In the neighboring state of Oregon, a consumer at a dispensary encounters gallon-size jars of cannabis from which a budtender weighs out the desired amount and packs it in a nondescript,

childproof plastic pill bottle with a simple label. That was the system in California during the era of medical marijuana, but with the legalization of recreational use the state requires cannabis to be prepacked, generally in 3.5-gram amounts. While not the aim of state regulations, the California requirement has led to the creation of increasingly elaborate packages and labels.

Black and Latinx cannabis industries have developed their own "commodity aesthetics," using product packaging, for example, to entice buyers with a combination of attractive sights, smells, textures, and symbols that represent the contradictions of working-class Black and Latinx life in contemporary California. Commodity aesthetics is a term used by Marxist cultural critics to understand how advertising appeals to the senses. Often studied as paradigmatic commodities, stimulating and intoxicating products such as tea, coffee, alcohol, and tobacco have long and well-developed advertising histories. Although plantation intoxicants have historically been produced by slaves and low wage Black, Latinx, and Asian farm workers, the emerging legal cannabis industry in California is partly driven by Black and Latinx growers, entrepreneurs, and consumers. California's commercial cannabis landscape includes boutique dispensaries and Las Vegas–style super stores; branded clothing and accessories; billboards and extensive and varied social media promotion; cannabis hotels, vacation rentals, consumption lounges, and spas; cannabis competitions, trade shows, music festivals, strain-launch parties, and dispensary pop-ups; and of course, cannabis packaging. Cannabis commodity aesthetics appeal to working-class consumers of color with discourses promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. Consuming cannabis is often celebrated as honoring Black and Latinx communities, like Black History Month and Hispanic Heritage Month, two commemorations that businesses take advantage of to promote cannabis. Cannabis advertising not only affirms cultural identities and diversity but also eroticizes them, selling cannabis with images of young Black and Latinx bodies. Finally, marketing links cannabis consumption to idealized images of the good life and upward mobility that partly present critical reflections on the material limits of Black and Latinx lives.

Black and Latinx cannabis cultures combine images of freedom and transcendence with depictions of the low wage jobs that many Black and Latinx people work. This is because, rather than an impediment to work, cannabis consumption is a kind of support for or accessory to labor. Many consumers use it to dull the tedium and pain of labor and to sustain them throughout the workday. After a brief overview of the history of race, cannabis prohibition, and post-prohibition regulation, this essay provides a critical study of Black and Latinx cannabis marketing in California, and its targeting of working-class consumers of color. While I discuss several examples, my central case study is the successful Black and Latinx cannabis distributor Teds Budz. I draw on interviews, ethnographies of cannabis events, and visual studies of cannabis packages and social media, arguing that seemingly "escapist" qualities in cannabis culture critically foreground the material limits of the world from which Black and Latinx workers are trying to escape. Cannabis commodity aesthetics, I conclude, promise people of color an exit from the drudgery of work while more closely tying them to low wage labor.[2] I conclude with a brief analysis of possible means of addressing such contributions by foregrounding cannabis unions.

From Prohibition to Regulation, or the History of Cannabis Racial Capitalism

California was the first western US state to criminalize cannabis in 1913.[3] But federal criminalization of cannabis begins with the Marijuana Tax Act of 1937. From the 1930s though the 1950s and after, cannabis was caught up in complex racializations. Cannabis prohibition targeted Black people in the US south and, especially, Mexicans in the southwest, and as a supposed gateway drug, cannabis was ultimately articulated to China and to cold war anticommunism. In 1969, the Marijuana Tax Act was declared unconstitutional, and in response, the Nixon administration placed cannabis in Schedule I of the 1970 Controlled Substances

Act, grouping it with heroin and cocaine as a drug without medical value but supposedly with significant potential for abuse. As it was previously linked to China, in the 1960s and 1970s cannabis was articulated, as a gateway, to heroin and framed by the anti-communist militarism of the Vietnam War. Nixon era criminalization, for instance, targeted rebellious Black people and anti-war hippies. In the late 1970s a number of states, including California, decriminalized cannabis possession, but the movement toward legalization was blocked by the Reagan administration, which again represented cannabis as a gateway drug, this time to cocaine. Hence the Reagan-era war on drugs used the racially coded threat of crack cocaine to police poor and working-class Black and Latinx people, who were disproportionately imprisoned for cannabis possession.[4] As I argued in *Drug Wars: The Political Economy of Narcotics*, cannabis prohibition has been a means of controlling racialized labor by incarcerating or deporting surplus workers and disciplining those that remain. Drawing on my work and the work of others, Barney Warf thus argues that the regulation of cannabis represents a powerful form of biopower that states use to control racialized bodies and populations.[5]

In 1996, California decriminalized medical cannabis, but the law did not address or regulate cannabis production and sale, while the cost of acquiring a doctor's recommendation excluded many poorer consumers. Given the historic stigmatization of cannabis and its continued criminalization at the federal level, others were afraid to go on record as cannabis consumers. Finally, in 2016, California voters passed Proposition 64: The Adult Use of Marijuana Act, which "legalizes specified personal use and cultivation of marijuana for adults 21 years of age or older; reduces criminal penalties for specified marijuana-related offenses for adults and juveniles; and authorizes resentencing or dismissal and sealing of prior, eligible marijuana-related convictions. The proposition includes provisions on regulation, licensing, and taxation of legalized use."[6]

So-called legalization remains continuous with prohibition in many ways.[7] Cannabis in California isn't "legal" as in freely available but remains regulated and restricted. Indigenous nations are barred from participating in the cannabis market and threatened with federal raids and arrest.[8] Meanwhile, criminal penalties for selling and consuming cannabis on the so-called black market, which accounts for most cannabis purchased in the state, remain in place. And while the total number of cannabis arrests in California have fallen post-prohibition, policing of the black market disproportionately targets Black and Latinx people. Given that cannabis culture skews young, it's significant that Black and Latinx youth under 21, who are barred from the legal market, are disproportionately arrested for cannabis offenses.[9] Such disproportionate policing is ideologically reinforced by the legal transition to "recreational" cannabis, which, disarticulated from medical justifications, retains the stigma associated with cannabis under prohibition, particularly when operating "underground."

Meanwhile, Oakland, Los Angeles, and other California cities have instituted social equity laws that, among other things, provide preferential access to licenses for growing and distributing cannabis based on an applicant's past cannabis convictions; history living in a community disproportionately impacted by the war on drugs; or identity as a woman or veteran.[10] At the state level, the California Department of Cannabis Control employs a Deputy Director of Equity and Inclusion which waives licensing fees and provides technical support for navigating the licensing process.[11] Such regulations have met with limited success in diversifying the industry since high start-up costs, as well as the costs of complying with state regulations, exclude most working-class Black and Latinx people from owning a licensed grow facility, retail dispensary, or distribution company.[12] Hence most owners in the industry are white.[13]

Cannabis Social Equity and the Marketing of Diversity

Building on the practice and theory of social equity laws, however, a small number of Black and Latinx cannabis companies are thriving in California, where they market cannabis with images of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Latinx cannabis companies include Dr. Greenthumb, a vertically integrated company (with its own clothing line) founded by rapper B-Real from Cypress Hill; the Backpack Boyz, another vertically integrated company owned by MMA fighter Juan Quesada; Ciencia Labs, founded by Carolina Vazquez, which markets "Luchador," a line of cannabis infused gummies in Mexican flavors like pitaya and chili lime (the company stages free Lucha Libre matches at dispensaries and other venues); Humo, whose slogan is "Craft Grown, Raza Owned," led by brand partner Susie Plascencia, who markets cannabis strains with names like "Cajeta" and "Pulque"; Dope Flavors from the Bay Area, a company that sells a strain named "Dr. Che," after Che Guevara; Loopy Sanchez, whose advertising slogan is "Barrio Grown"; and POLA, which markets the cannabis-infused beverage brand Agua de Flor and a line of cannabis infused chocolates called La Familia.[14]

Jay Z's Monogram, the biggest Black-owned cannabis company in California, brands cannabis as part of a luxury "good life," while also emphasizing equity. Monogram employs acclaimed grower Deandre Watson as Culture and Cultivation Chief at the company's massive San Jose warehouse. Watson, who was previously arrested for growing cannabis, claims:

We all know that the War on Drugs disproportionately victimized people of color and I am one of those people. It was a major challenge to break into legal cannabis. I never thought it would be a legitimate business and I'm blessed to be living a dream that I never even dreamed. Working with Monogram has been so

fulfilling because of what we're doing to increase social equity within this industry. That starts with creating more above-board opportunities for people like me.[15]

On a smaller level, University of California, Berkeley graduate Chris Ball from Rialto, California, successfully applied for social equity licenses to grow and distribute cannabis for his company, Ball Family Farms around 2014. Before that, he had been arrested by the DEA for distributing cannabis across state lines and spent months in jail. Ball now markets cannabis strains named after Black film characters such as "Laura Charles" (*The Last Dragon*) and "Nino Brown" (*New Jack City*).[16] There are also dispensaries that use representations of Black feminist icons in their marketing. The South Central Los Angeles dispensary called "Josephine & Billie's" was founded by Whitney Beatty under a social equity license in 2021. Focused on women of color cannabis consumers—especially Black women—the dispensary is named for Josephine Baker and Billie Holiday who feature prominently in the company's branding. As the dispensary's mission statement explains, "Our name pays homage to Josephine Baker and Billie Holiday, two women of color who were persecuted for their cannabis consumption and yet used their art to fight against injustice, rejected the mainstream, made their own rules, and most importantly, held the door open for other women who will come after them." [17] The dispensary has attracted investments from Jay-Z. Finally, the Los Angeles dispensary chain called Sixty-Four & Hope is owned by Aja Allen and Rhavin Klein under equity licenses supported by investments from Queen Latifha and Nas, with plans to open a total of 21 such dispensaries.[18] Echoing social equity laws and discourse, these entrepreneurs brand cannabis in DEI terms.

The largest force for commercial, DEI cannabis in California and the world is the Cookies Company, founded by Latinx rapper Berner, the stage name of Gilbert Anthony Milam, Jr. Profiled in *Forbes* in 2022, Milam grew up in San Francisco, where his father managed a Mexican restaurant, before moving to Arizona. His company is vertically integrated, producing, distributing, and selling cannabis in

its chain of 40 storefront dispensaries in several US states as well as in Israel, Spain, Portugal, and Thailand. There are 22 dispensaries in California—Southern California and the Bay Area, but also throughout the San Joaquín Valley. The Cookies Company is inspired by and employs Latinx and Black multicultural, urban imagery reminiscent of Sesame Street, as suggested by its ubiquitous baby blue branding, the color of Sesame Street's beloved Cookie Monster. Because it remains illegal at the federal level, cannabis is a cash industry without ready access to credit and financial institutions. While this creates difficulties for everyone in the industry, it produces special barriers for Black and Latinx people. As one anonymous Black cannabis entrepreneur explained:

You will not get into this industry if you are black and do not have a $1 million. Good luck finding an investor who is not a predator. We cannot go into a bank and get a business loan because cannabis is illegal on a federal level. Limited access to capital has nothing to do with not knowing where to get money or having no money available. Many investors, even black ones, look at us as a risk because of our race.[19]

As a work around, Berner discovered that while weed can't be copyrighted, other Cookies products could, so the company began to market a line of clothing, bags, and accessories. As Berner told a video blogger in 2021, the Cookies clothing line alone earns $55 million a year.[20]

Berner markets both clothing and cannabis with ideas and practices of diversity. Like other Black and Latinx growers and distributors, "equity" is one of his keywords, foregrounded on the company's "social impact" web page, titled "Stronger, more equitable communities through cannabis."[21] As he told *Forbes*, "Black and brown communities set trends. It's important to realize that our personality and our aura brings a lot to the table…So make sure you get your equity, that your value is recognized. Use your aura to get through the door and work with someone, and work hard. And get equity, ask for something that can

last forever."[22] Berner here uses the term "equity" to explain the commercial value of POC culture: because people of color set cannabis trends, they should have a share of cannabis wealth. These ideals regarding equity inform Berner's "Cookies University," a Humboldt County summer school introducing working-class Black and Latinx students to the cannabis industry. The school is on the site of a historic road-side attraction on Highway 101, "The One Log Tree," a giant redwood tree that was hollowed out in the 1930s and turned into a tiny house (Figure 5). The refunctioning of a former logging attraction as part of a cannabis attraction suggests the extent to which cannabis has replaced logging as the region's most important industry. Berner bought the property, including the log house (which visitors can tour for a nominal fee), and built a gift shop, dispensary, consumption lounge, outdoor cannabis farm, underground genetics library, and classroom (Figure 6). Students live there in modern, tiny houses (Figure 7).

Figures 5–7. Sign for Berner's One Log cannabis complex in Humboldt County, A-frame sign for the One Log Cookies Dispensary, and tiny houses for "Cookies U." Photos by author.

Cookies U echoes equity licensing laws. To be eligible for admission, applicants must meet one or more "social equity criteria," such as cannabis arrests, low income, housing insecurity, homelessness, US military service, or being a woman, person of color, and/or an LGBTQ+ person who has worked in the cannabis industry. The school graduated its first class of four in summer 2022. Cookies U was advertised with a half hour video, widely circulated on social media,

documenting the CEO's visit to the school and his meeting with students.[23] The company also maintains three Instagram accounts devoted to the summer school and other "social impact" programs.[24] And Berner plans more schools in Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York City.[25] In these ways, Berner's company has rearticulated the language of social equity for marketing. The company even markets what it calls "social impact" strains such as Cake Mix, advertised with the stylized image of a woman of color smoking a joint. In his analysis of Colorado, Marty Otañez argues that the social responsibility programs of cannabis corporations can become forms of "greenwashing" that distract from questions of worker wages and health and safety.[26] Most jobs in the cannabis industry are low wage and unregulated. Employee comments on job review websites such as glassdoor.com and indeed.com complain about the lack of job security and prospects for promotion, and that the Cookies Company seems to put profits over people.[27]

In his *Forbes* interview Berner suggests that cannabis is a racialized product that radiates Black and brown "auras," indicating that the success of the Cookies corporation is partly based on the appropriation and commodification of racial identities.[28] The Instagram account for its flagship clothing store in San Francisco includes images of lowrider cars and bikes; rappers with tattoos, grills, and oversized medallions; and attractive young Black and Latinx men and women in Cookies clothing. While not always the case, the young women are often dressed in revealing ways, emphasizing a conventionally gendered appeal to consumers. While usually wearing more clothes, however, the young men of color in Cookies ads are also eroticized, offered up to the viewer as attractive product spokesmodels. The sensual appeal of the company's marketing is in keeping with a longer history of commodity aesthetics. As Wolfgang Haug writes in *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society,*

> a whole range of commodities can be seen casting flirtatious glances at the buyers, in an exact imitation of or even surpassing the buyers' own glances, which they use in courting their human objects of affection. Whoever goes courting makes themselves attractive and desirable. All manner of jewelry, fabrics, scents and colors offer themselves as means of presenting beauty and desirability. Thus, commodities borrow their aesthetic language from human courtship; but then the relationship is reversed and people borrow their aesthetic expression from the world of the commodity.

Haug concludes that in commodities, "powerful aesthetic stimulation, exchange-value and libido cling to one another," and I would add race to that mix since Cookies appeals to consumers by eroticizing Black and Latinx styles and identities.[29] The company effectively sells Blackness and brownness to both white consumers and consumers of color.

Teds Budz: Selling the Working-Class Good Life

The small Los Angeles based company Teds Budz, founded by Theo "Ted" Lewis, is named after Lewis's grandfather and namesake, whose disapproving cartoon face appears on its logo, product labels, promotional materials, and even the tattoo on Lewis's left arm (Figures 8–9). Raised in Omaha, Nebraska, the younger Lewis relocated to southern California over a decade ago. At that time, he began turning distressed houses into boarded-up grow spaces. In 2015, he was arrested for running an illegal dispensary and growing facility, barely avoiding federal prison. Lewis attended California State University Northridge as a Black studies major; when we met in summer 2022, he was reading Malcom X. Aware of his college background, I gave him a copy of my book, *Drug Wars: The Political Economy of Narcotics*; he's half my age and interacts with me like someone who has talked to professors before. Later I learn that Lewis promoted his cannabis

events on a podcast by saying “You got gang members coming out, cholos coming out, professors coming out.”

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-8-1.jpg>

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-9.jpeg>

Figures 8–9. Theo "Ted" Lewis (right) posing with a fan (left) at a Teds Budz event at a dispensary in the industrial, working-class Latinx city Maywood, in Los Angeles County. An image of Theo Lewis' grandfather and namesake on a cannabis package. Photos by author.

Lewis's ambition to distribute legal cannabis was shaped by his working-class Black background and its disproportionate vulnerability to policing and incarceration. As he told *LA Weekly*, "The cannabis industry is saturated with trust fund kids who have not had to risk their lives in order to see this opportunity . . . . After I found out how social equity opportunities were being stolen from the true grassroots entrepreneurs I attended town hall meetings, protests, and audits for different rounds of social equity licensing."[30] When I interviewed him, Lewis told me he was a cannabis distributor and no longer a grower because the equipment for indoor grows is too expensive: "Sorry I don't have rich parents, none of that shit, to help me fund a grow . . . . LED lights two Gs a piece."[31] His arrest made him eligible for an equity license and Teds Budz was incorporated in 2020. "I'm glad it worked out this way" he told me, "or I could be dead or in jail."[32] The company distributes cannabis from several growers, including Black, Asian, and Latinx producers.

The distribution routes for Teds Budz map working-class Black and Latinx California. Social media announcements about new drop locations include relatively wealthy places like Los Angeles' Melrose Avenue and West Hollywood, and San Francisco's Haight Ashbury, but also many other, more precarious places in the state—working-class Black and Latinx towns and cities in the Inland Empire, South LA, East LA, and the San Joaquin Valley. Teds Budz has hosted in-store events at dispensaries in Southern California (San Bernadino, Maywood, Long Beach, La Mesa, Riverside), the Central Valley (Fresno, Modesto, Sacramento), and Oakland. At the six events I've attended, the other customers were mostly young, working-class Black and Latinx cannabis enthusiasts, the majority men but with significant numbers of women. Teds Budz events are formally different than those of most other companies, which often send a single employee with a table

and some samples to a “patient appreciation day” event organized by a dispensary. Lewis and his staff put on much more elaborate events, and they discovered that when Lewis was present, many more people would come out to meet the charismatic distributor.[33]

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-10.jpg>

Figure 10. Poster for a Teds Budz dispensary event featuring Grandpa Ted. Screenshot by author.

Fall 2022, I saw an Instagram invitation for a Teds Budz meet-and-greet at a dispensary called "Cookies San Bern" in San Bernadino, a city that's 12.6 % Black and 68% Latinx, with over 30% of its population living below the poverty line (compared to the national average of 11 percent)[34] (Figure 10). It's over 100 degrees Fahrenheit when I arrive at a strip mall just off the freeway in a busy commercial area. I'm half an hour early for the 4 p.m. event but there's already six enthusiastic young brown people waiting in the punishing Inland Empire sun: four boys and one couple, the girl with braces on her teeth. One kid looks like a brown version of Dustin from the TV show *Stranger Things*, but with a nose ring, a Teds Budz T-shirt, and a biohazard-orange trucker hat. He works security somewhere nearby, and everyone seems to know him. People in line talk knowledgeably about recent Teds Budz drops, which can sell for over $70 an eighth with taxes. They seem to spend a lot on cannabis, which partly explains the party vibe, in expectation of free weed, free food, and swag.

The line is soon joined by two Latinos dressed cholo style. One is a handsome young man who could have been a Calvin Klein model back in the day. His friend is a little older, with a shaved head, goatee, and neck tattoo, and he parks a baby blue Mustang in the strip mall lot with a sticker across the top of the windshield reading "Mike's Stang." Impatient for the event to start, they smoke a joint in the car. Filling out the line is a young Black woman wearing a black baseball cap with the word "Issues" stitched on it in white; another Black woman passing out flyers for her upcoming art show; a young Black man with dreadlocks in a wheelchair; and a big friendly white guy wearing American flag Crocs. Most people look under 30, so I'm the oldest person in line.

A Cookies San Bern worker tells us Ted's stuck in traffic and offers everyone branded lighters or bandannas while they wait. Ted's staff arrives around 4:30, including his graphic designer Jacqueline Wallace, a photographer/videographer, and Ted's partner Anthony Garcia. They buy bottles of water from the 7-Eleven next to the dispensary and hand them out to the crowd. Next, the "All Flavor, No

Grease" food truck rolls into the lot and tickets for free tacos are distributed. Ted arrives shortly after, with the Black Thai rapper from Detroit named Eastside Eggroll, his collaborator on a new strain called "Duck Sauce."

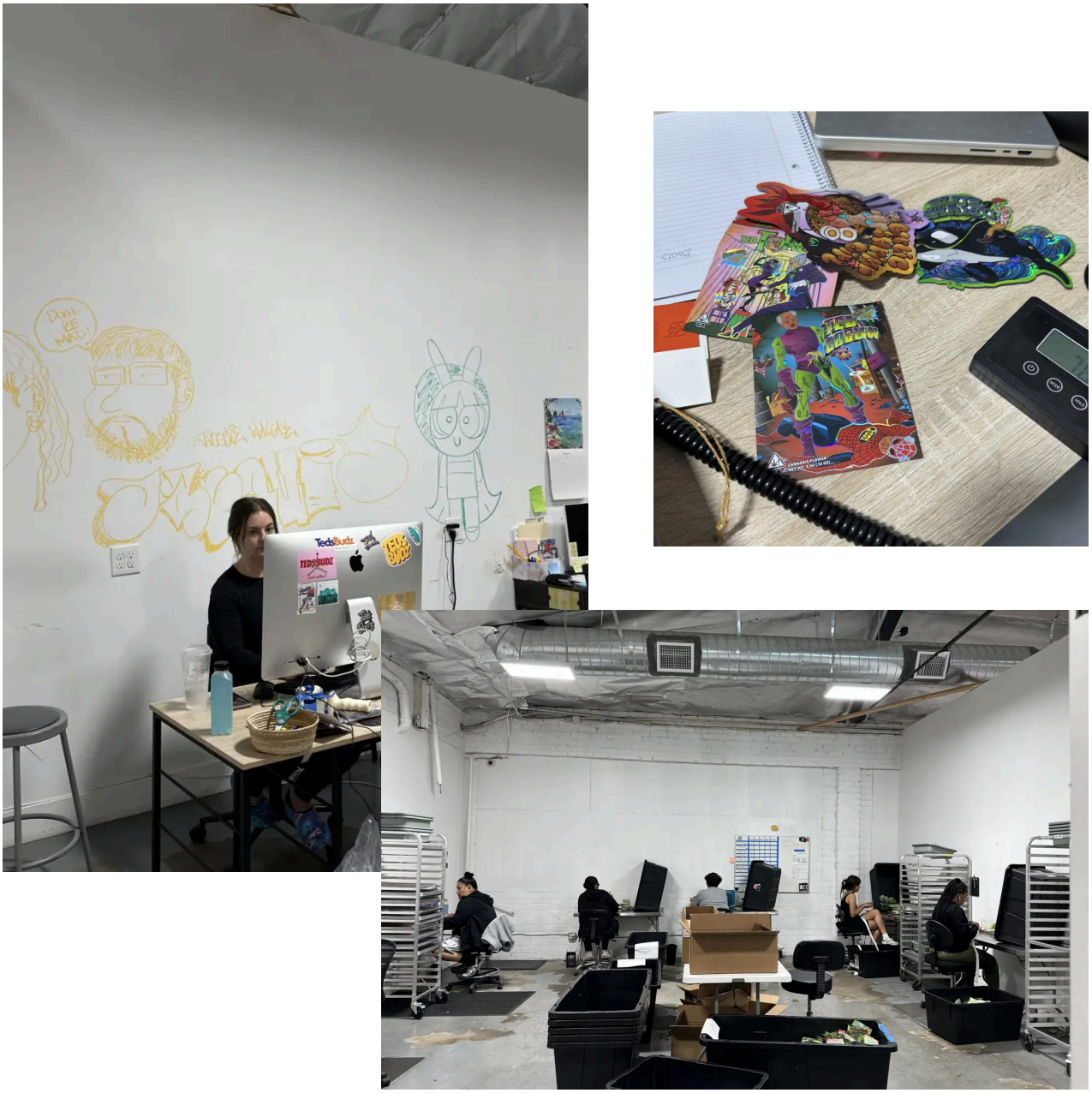
As Ted sets up, the line is hustled into the Cookies San Bern worker break room, where everyone is given a pink post-it with a number. The first twenty people are eligible for a "BOGO" deal—buy an eighth an ounce of cannabis and get a second free. On entering the showroom, customers spin a wheel for prizes, including branded hats, shirts, sweatpants, and of course cannabis. Ted signs them all and poses for pictures. Singly and in groups, young Black and Latinx people exit to the parking lot as the sun mercifully begins to set and Friday night begins. The event was memorialized in a Teds Budz Tik Tok video (Figure 11). It reminded me of collective working-class pleasures like rent parties, carnivals, and barbecues. Which is to say that Teds Budz at Cookies San Bern fed Black and Latinx desires for "the good life," a world of freedom and plenty beyond existing restrictions and privations.

https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-11.jpg>

Figure 11. In this scene from a Tik Tok video, Lewis (second from the right) poses with members of his staff and dispensary workers in San Bernadino. Screenshot by author.

In its day-to-day operations, Teds Budz projects a working-class identity. The company is in an industrial section of the Latinx neighborhood of Boyle Heights, in a small warehouse that formerly housed a Korean clothing manufacturer. Most of the staff is Latinx or Black, including Lewis's mother, who works on accounts receivable, and his sister, who works in the packing room (Figure 12). Seven people work there weighing, packing, and labeling cannabis. Also on staff are the previously mentioned photographer/videographer and graphic designer Wallace who works on promotional art, the Ted Budz clothing line, and the company's social media, as well as a compliance officer (Figures 13–14). The workers at Teds Budz thus resemble the people who smoke Teds Budz. Lewis self-consciously pitches his products to working-class Black and Latinx consumers, who, he argues, drive cannabis trends in the state. He and his staff recently traveled over five hours to Modesto because the city with the large, working-class Latinx population is California's largest consumer of Teds Budz. Reflecting a similar working-class constituency in Southern California, Lewis promotes "stash n dash" events where he posts videos of himself on social media hiding a bag of cannabis in an urban location and then posts a subsequent video when someone finds it. As Lewis explained to me, he only does that in "ghetto" neighborhoods, because "Brad and Chad don't need free weed." He insists "I'm not bougie" and believes he's been successful partly because he comes from the same "demographic" as his customers. "I feel like I do speak for the black and brown, the streets in general, what people want, because I'm just like them."[35] As a result, growers ask

him to evaluate the potential appeal of different strains for the Black and Latinx market.



Figures 12–14. Graphic design and packing rooms in the Teds Budz warehouse. Desktop with packages for forthcoming strains, including “Blue Shamu,” featuring Grandpa Ted riding a killer whale. Photos by author.

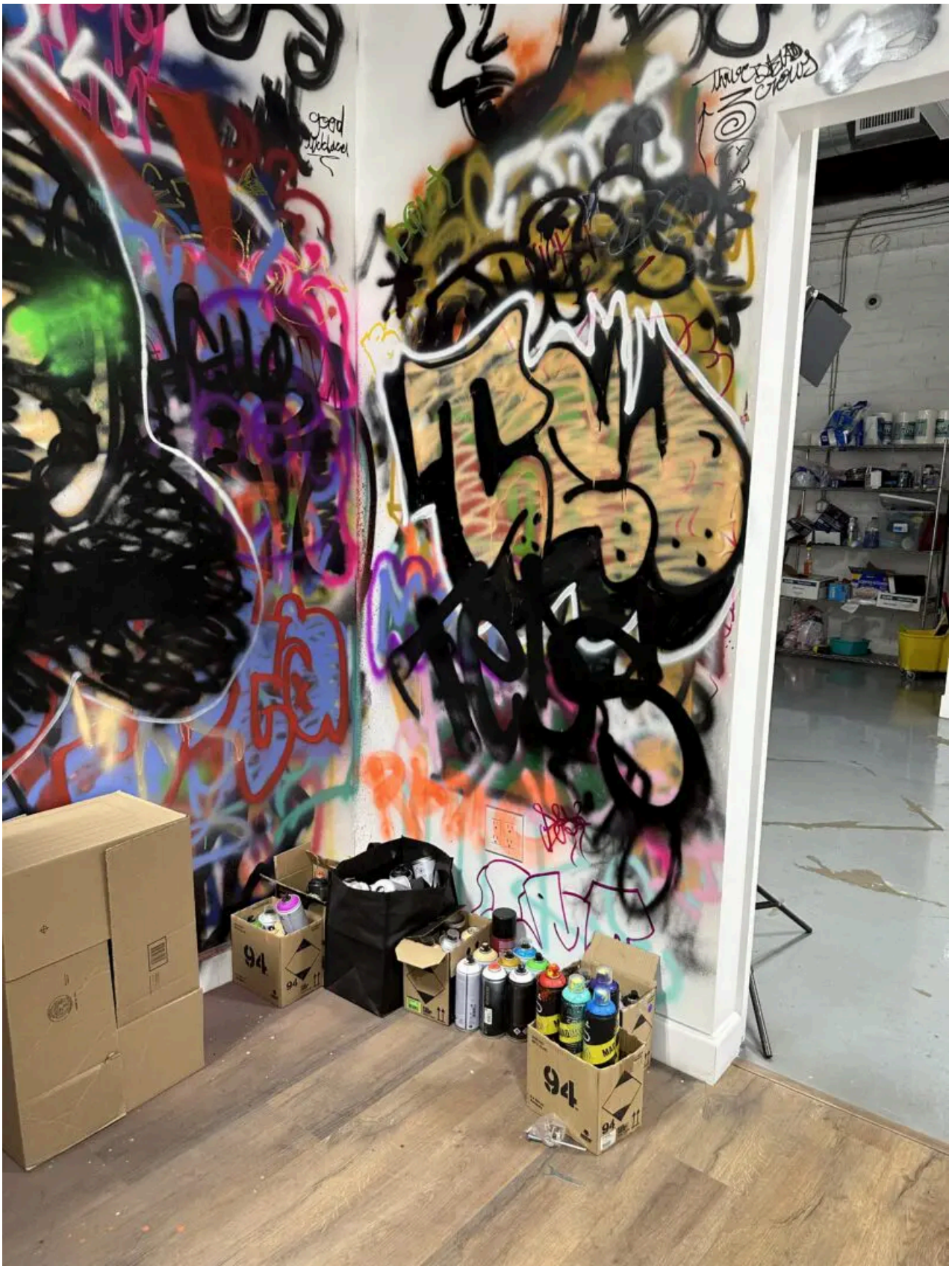
This thriving cannabis scene is represented in eye-grabbing cannabis packaging, with different designs and imagery reflecting regional and demographic

differences in production and consumption. Some cannabis branding is implicitly white and directed at white consumers as the default, while other branding is marked as Black and/or Latinx. Examples of the former are brands in white jars that resemble Apple designs, with intimations of high-tech efficiency that have historically been associated with white masculinity. Dispensaries that specialize in those brands incorporate elements of "white" interior design in their showrooms such as earth tones, reclaimed wood, and digital tablets at product viewing stations reminiscent of Apple Stores (Figure 15). These elements of interior design were well represented in the TV sitcom titled *Disjointed* (Netflix, 2017–18) featuring a dispensary called "Ruth's Alternative Care" owned by a white boomer hippie and medical cannabis activist played by Kathie Bates. Modeled on a real dispensary in West Los Angeles, Ruth's Alternative Care is brightly lit, with stained glass windows and blonde wood bars and display cases. Meanwhile, Ruth's competitor, "Bud, Bong and Beyond," features white tablets on wood display tables, as well as a "Greenius Bar" in imitation of Apple's "Genius Bar." The "white" dispensaries that inspired *Disjointed* often don't sell the Black and Latinx brands that are the focus of this essay.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-15.jpeg>

Figure 15. An example of a “white” cannabis commodity aesthetic resembling Apple designs. Photo by author.

The container of choice for Teds Budz and other Black and Latinx cannabis brands is the mylar bag. It’s an inexpensive material for making resealable packages that are lighter and easier to transport than glass jars, and which take up significantly less warehouse space. Mylar bags are also an aesthetic medium, covered in images like tattooed bodies or luxury fashion goods. The interiors of Teds Budz bags are often embossed with thematic images or grower logos, while bag exteriors are sometimes covered in ornate “TB” monograms and cross hatching that mimic patterns on designer handbags, symbols of the good life. The fronts and backs of mylar bags are also used as surfaces for elaborate art aimed at working-class Black and Latinx consumers. Lewis collaborates with graphic designer Wallace, and sometimes his tattoo artist, to design the packages. A fan of anime and other cartoons, he’s an avid sketch artist, who tries out ideas on whiteboards and on walls in the warehouse media room where he spray-paints murals (Figure 16). Lewis shares sketches with Wallace, who realizes the final version, but often after much back and forth. He showed me images on his phone of multiple drafts of the art for the strain “Big Squid,” for example, featuring a cartoon squid riding a surfboard.



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-16.jpeg>

Figure 16. Spray paint corner in the media room at the Teds Budz warehouse. Photo by author.

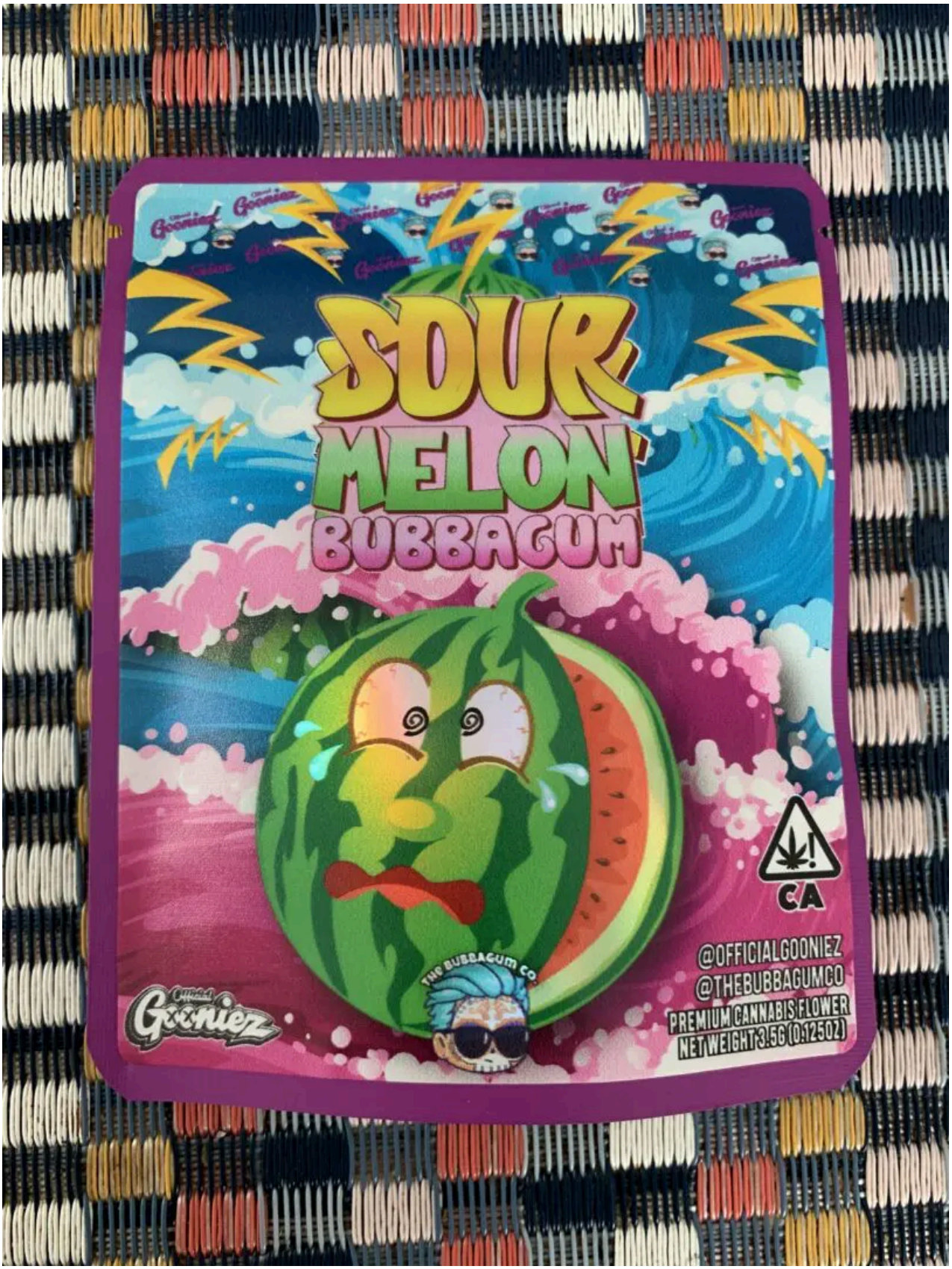
Cannabis labels represent Black and brown working-class life not with realist images but in fantastic forms. The label art for the Teds Budz distributed strain called “WowDatsFire” depicts a cartoon Latinx landscape worker spraying water from a hose on a fire raging across an urban landscape (Figure 17). “Fire” is one of the most common honorifics applied to good cannabis both verbally and graphically, as in the “fire” emoji on Instagram. Many Latinx people in Southern California also work in fire abatement, removing weeds and other debris to protect homes and businesses.[36]

The package for the strain “Carrots” similarly features a cartoon representation of food service: a giant rabbit and a restaurant worker both smoking blunts (Figure 18) Many other packages promote fruit flavors with images reminiscent of California fruit labels and the history of Latinx farm labor behind them, as in the mylar bags for “Sour Melon Bubbagum [*sic*]”[37] (Figure 19). Another occupation is depicted on the “Zuckaz” strain label, where Grandpa Ted appears as a salesperson in a candy store (Figure 20).

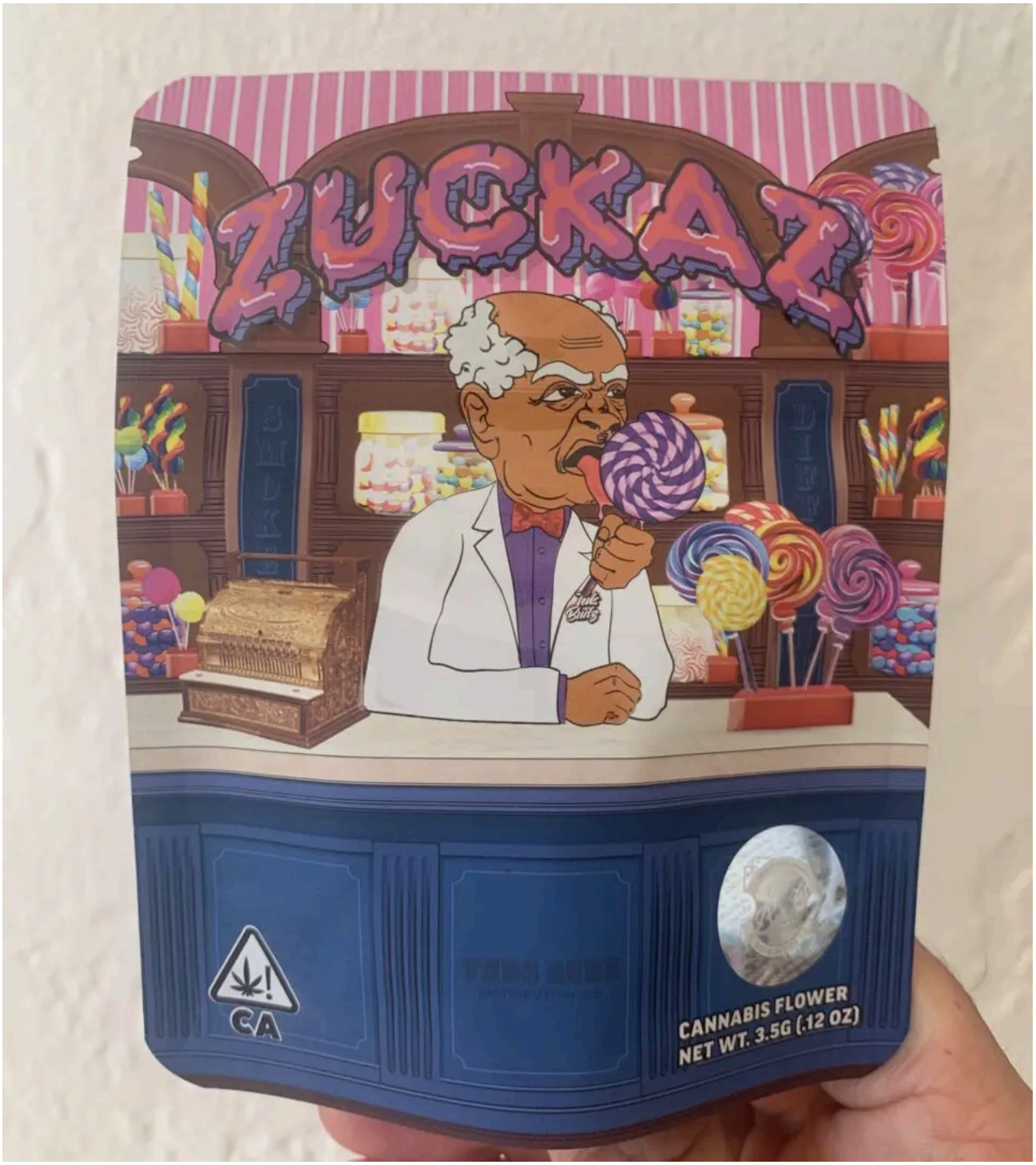
< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-17-2.jpeg>

PREMIUM CANNABIS FLOWER
THE SMOKER'S CLUB™
Carrots
A SIMPLE GUIDE TO CULTIVATING AND COOKING CANNABIS
BROUGHT TO YOU BY ANWAR CARROTS & THE SMOKERS CL
CA
3.5 GRAMS
NET WT. 0.125 OZ

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-18-1.jpeg>



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-19-1.jpeg>



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-20-1.jpeg>

Figures 17–20. Cannabis packages representing a landscape worker and a food service worker, recalling historic labels for produce harvested by farm workers, and depicting Grandpa Ted as a retail worker. Photos by author.

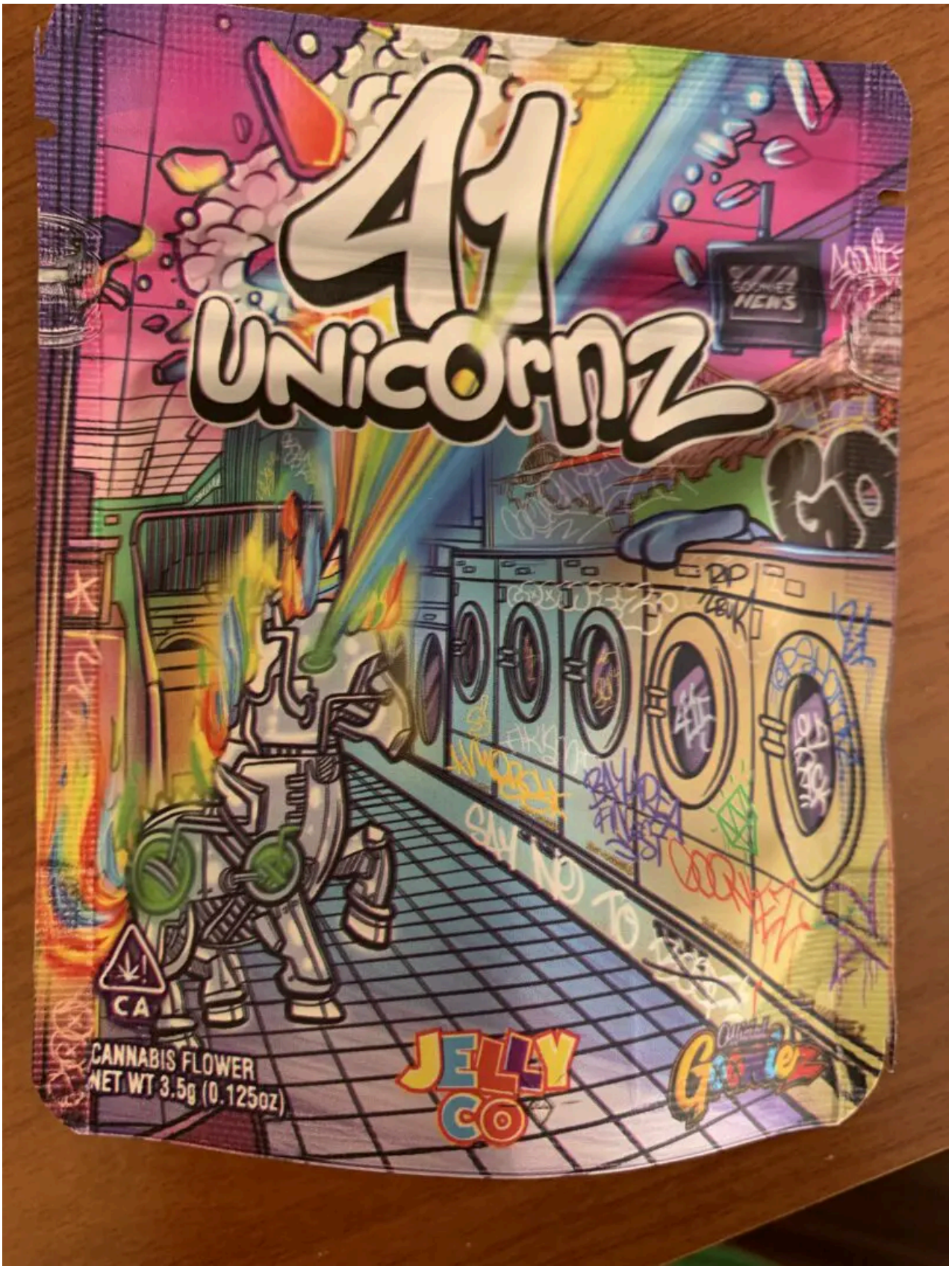
Black and Latinx consumers and their family members and friends may well have worked in landscaping, food service, farm labor, or retail, making cannabis labels imaginative reflections on their own labor histories. My final example of a fantastic depiction of work is the package for the strain Z-Rilla, depicting a green zombie in blue jeans and a blue work shirt over a white t-shirt. The label humorously teases the powerful effects of the cannabis inside (the zombie's exposed brain suggests comparison to Cypress Hill's stoner anthem "Insane in the Membrane"), while also referencing the history of zombies as representations of workers of color (Figure 21). Such packages take for granted that cannabis consumption is integral to Black and Latinx working class life.

No Tobacco Or Marijuana At Anytime
Z-RILLA
TOTAL CANNABINOIDS: 31.70%
TOTAL THC: 31%
TOTAL CBD: 0.189%
BATCH #: TBZR00002
WWW.P65WARNINGS.CA.GOV
PACKAGE DATE: 06.03.2022
UID: 1A406030000A2D6000006444
DISTRIBUTED BY TEDS BUDZ
63411080
Official Gooniez x 12 Alarm Fire –
Greenwolf LA
C10–0000549–LIC
Package: 1A406030000A2D6000007046
GOVERNMENT WARNING: THIS PACKAGE CONTA
OF CHILDREN AND ANIMALS. CANNABIS MAY ONLY BE PO
UNLESS THE PERSON IS A QUALIFIED PATIENT. CANNAB
CONSUMPTION OF CANNABIS IMPAIRS YOUR ABILITY TO
WARNING: THIS PRODUCT MAY EXPOSE YOU TO
THE STATE OF CA TO CAUSE CANCER. FOR MORE INFO G

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-21.jpeg>

Figure 21. Cannabis package representing a zombie worker. Photo by author.

Cannabis labels further appeal to consumers with fantastic representations of mobility that contrast with the limits of working-class realities. The label for the strain “Ultra Slushers” depicts Black and brown figures flying over a cityscape, leaving rainbow trails in their wake. The package for the strain “Milky Belts” similarly features Grandpa Ted flying a colorful retro rocket into space. The bag for “41 Unicornz” combines a familiar working-class setting—a graffiti-covered laundromat—with a unicorn that blasts rainbow rays through the roof (Figure 22).



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-22.jpeg>

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-23.jpeg>

Figures 22–23. Cannabis packages with a unicorn blasting a rainbow opening out of a laundromat and a black anime sea urchin riding a wave. Photos by author.

Part of a “deep sea” series, the package for “Uni” depicts a smiling, spiny black sea urchin, wearing a blue “Ted’s Budz” hat, riding high on an ocean wave as the sun sets (Figure 23). Similarly, the bag for “Blue Shamu” features Grandpa Ted dressed as a cowboy, riding a killer whale. A few packages riff on comic book characters with superpowers of mobility such as “The Fastest Man Alive: Ted Flash,” with an image of Grandpa Ted dressed as the Flash dashing through a city street, the air pressure generated by his high velocity visible in the windblown hair and flying hats and ties of the pedestrians he speeds past; and “The Amazing Spidey-Ted,” represented by Grandpa Ted, costumed as Spiderman, swinging by a web through a city skyline.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-24.jpeg>

Figure 24. Cannabis package featuring a Buick muscle car. Photo by author.

Finally, several packages depict a romanticized Buick Grand National car, which also appears on the company's website and other promotional material (Figure 24). In auto-dominated Southern California, such a vehicle represents freedom of movement. Lewis himself is the proud owner of a black Grand National, which he features in his videos. Working with his graphic designer and manufacturers in the downtown LA garment district, he also designs and sells a line of racing jackets. A common genre of photos on cannabis Instagram are taken from inside cars, where consumers fresh from the dispensary display their new purchases. The focus on cars as symbols and settings compliments the use of the word "gas" to describe the desirable taste, smell, and effect of cannabis strains. As Lewis confirms, Black and brown consumers in California demand a "gassy" flavor profile. Such cannabis has also been described as tasting like "jet fuel," which, like "gas," suggests its utopian powers of transport beyond the material limits of the here and now. In response to the challenges that working people of color face both in terms of physical mobility (the cost of transportation; racial profiling by the police) and class mobility (the stratified labor relations of contemporary racial capitalism) fantastic images of flight, driving, and even surfing entice consumers with powerful promises of freedom.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-25.jpeg>

Figure 25. Lewis' partner Anthony Garcia (foreground, right), proprietor of the Flower District line of cannabis, at a Teds Budz event in Long Beach. Photo by author.

The Teds Budz related brand called "The Flower District," is named after the Flower District in downtown Los Angeles where Latinx wholesalers and workers sell flowers harvested in California, often by Latinx farmworkers. The line is produced by Lewis's partner, Anthony Garcia, who remembers his family's visits there[38] (Figure 25). Cannabis buds are the cured flowers of the plant, and Flower District strains were initially packed in pink bags embossed with roses and named "Primrose," "Lilium," and "Dahlia." As Lewis explained in an Instagram video, the package has a unique design, with a wide opening that's easier for hands with long nails to reach into. Flower District art reinforces this point by representing brown hands with long pink nails rolling a joint of flowers against an Inland Empire

desert backdrop (Figure 26). In film studies this would be called a point of view shot since the image is from the implied vantage point of the figure rolling the joint as they look at their work.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-26.jpeg>

Figure 26. The "Dahlia" strain package, aimed at women of color. Photo by author.

This presentation of the point of view of a working class woman of color is replicated in the Instagram video promoting the Dahlia strain. Filmed at sunset, at the Los Angeles County Fair in Pomona, the video echoes the carnivalesque pleasures on offer at the company's dispensary events. It follows a group of young Black, Latinx, and white women, several of whom work at Teds Budz, as they walk through the midway, play carnival games, and smoke joints on an aerial

tramway and a Ferris wheel. Among the women in the video is Wallace, the Teds Budz graphic designer who designed the Dahlia mylar bag. Their movements through the fair are stitched together with repeated shots of women looking at the cannabis package, and POV shots of the package held by hands with brightly colored acrylic nails, thus doubly representing a woman-of-color gaze and inviting viewers to identify with it. Reinforcing such identifications, in the final shots a fem Latinx young person offers the camera the joint she holds in her pink nails (Figure 27).

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-27.jpg>

Figure 27. Final shot from the Teds Budz video promoting the “Dahlia” strain. Screenshot by author.

Finally, the sunset timing of the video entices with intimations of freedom. A summer sunset in the desert sky brings the relief of cooler weather but also twilight, that space in-between day and night symbolizing possibility, or what José Muñoz theorized as futurity, the open-ended desire for a world beyond the limits of the present. In all these ways The Flower District appeals to consumers by

presenting a working-class woman-of-color vision of the good life. Dahlia anticipates the more recent package for another Teds Budz-distributed strain by Black Bay Area grower Cream City called “BAPS.” As the back of the package explains, BAP is an acronym for “Black American Pressure” (in canna-slang “pressure” is used to describe the effects of especially good cannabis), but it also refers to the phrase “Black American Princess” and the title of the film *BAPS* (1997), about Black waitresses from Georgia who seek their fortunes in Los Angeles. Ads for the BAPS cannabis strain include an artist’s image of Halle Berry in her *BAPS* film role, while the package features bejeweled Black hands with long acrylic nails rolling a joint (Figure 28).

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-28.jpeg>

Figure 28. Package for the "BAP" strain, referencing the film BAPS. Photo by author.

The juxtaposition of working-class life and the transcendence of its difficult or oppressive conditions further describes the promotional videos Lewis has made parodying popular movies and TV shows. In "Ted Montana," Lewis plays a campy version of Cuban drug dealer Tony Montana from *Scarface* (Figure 29). In a *Law and Order* parody, he plays a detective investigating a case of "death by boof"

(slang for bad weed). Ted returns to fighting boof in parodies of *Batman* and *Game of Thrones* (Figures 30–31). Meanwhile, a video inspired by Jordan Peele's *Get Out* jokes about the difficulties of the working day with a skit about a pompous manager and featuring terrified reaction shots from workers (Figures 32). The videos are earnestly goofy, with decidedly low production values, filmed in the Teds Budz warehouse, and all roles are played by people who work there. White walls, exposed airducts, metal shelfing, packing tables, and employee lockers provide the contrasting setting for fantasy cosplay and comedy skits. Recently, Teds Budz even hosted a screening of their partial remake of the film *Training Day* starring Lewis, Garcia, and Garcia's father (Figure 33). Such juxtapositions of work and pleasure, labor, and the good life, define the cannabis commodity aesthetics employed by Teds Budz.

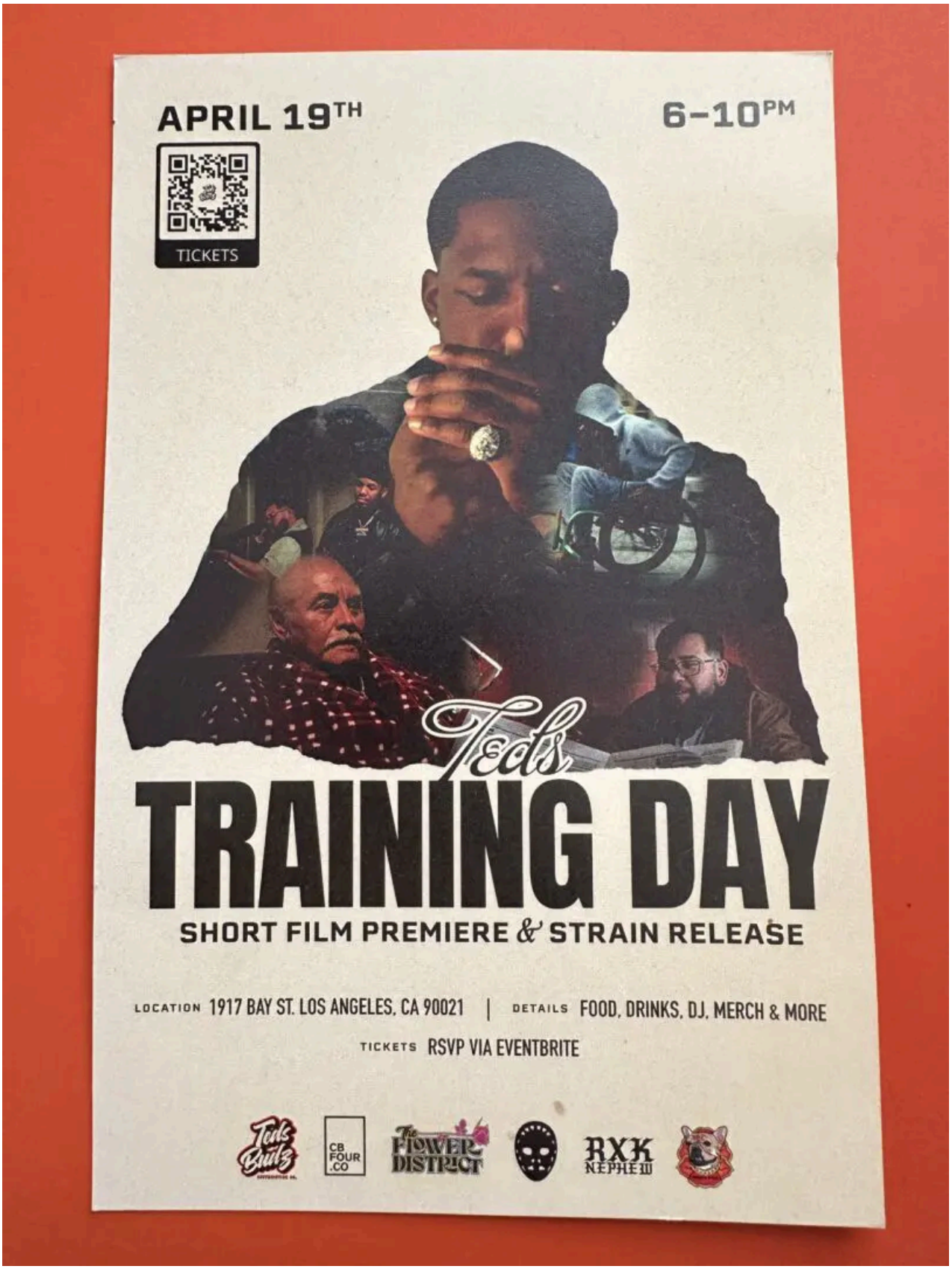
< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-29-3.jpg>

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-30-3.jpg>

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-31-3.jpg>

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-33-3.jpg>

Figures 29–32. Teds Budz parodies of *Scarface*, *Batman*, *Get Out*, and *Game of Thrones* (clockwise from upper left). Screenshots by author.



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-34-4.jpeg>

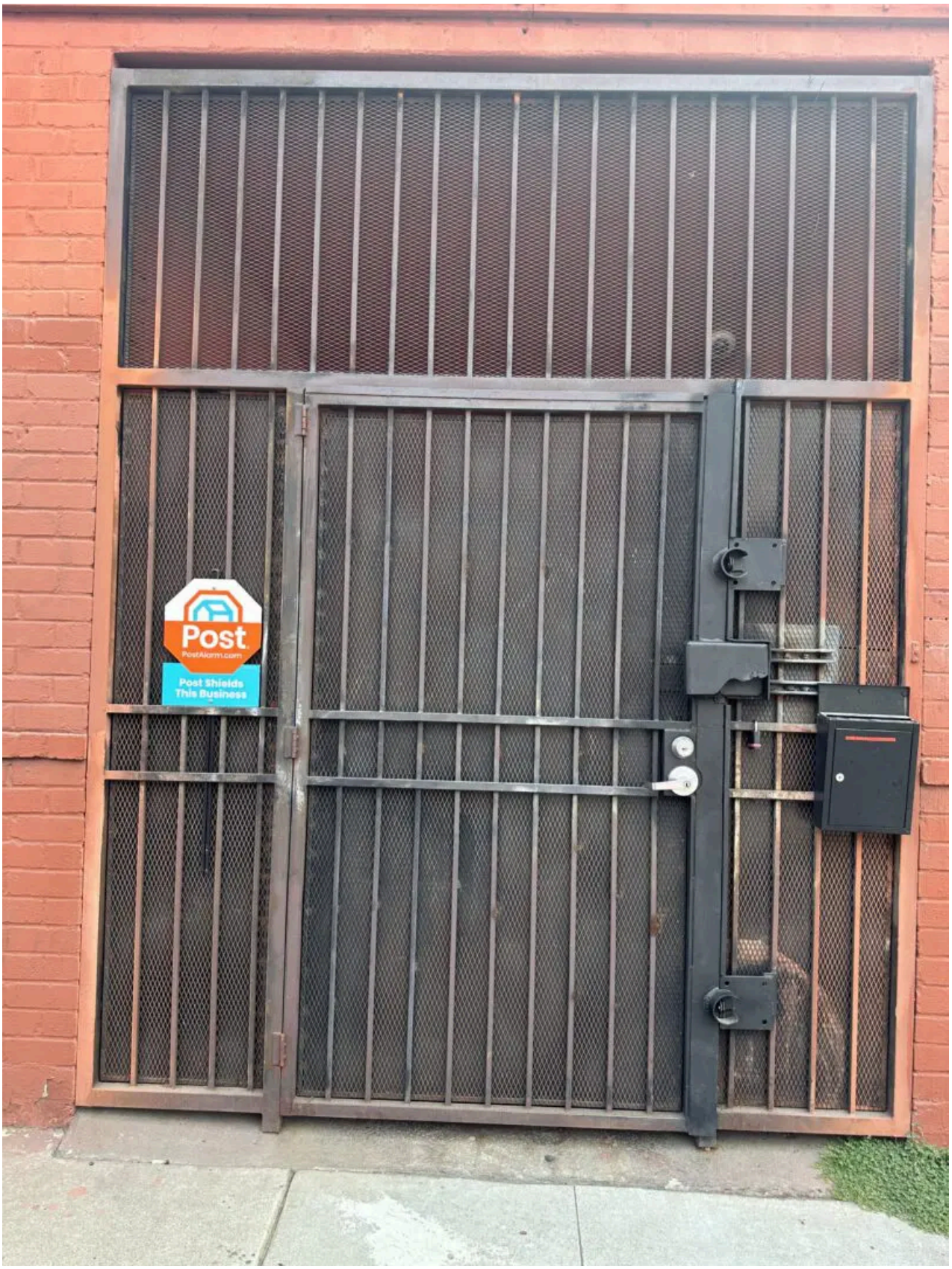
Figure 33. Poster for a screening of the short film titled *Ted's Training Day*. Photo by author.

Scholars who study the history of drug use emphasize its incorporation into labor relations. Haug argues that "powerful stimulants" such as spices, tea, and coffee (I would add opium and coca) "have entered European history as instruments of merchant capitalist valorization."[39] Over time, however, western capitalism, according to Haug, required the "clear-headed bourgeois intoxication" of chocolate, tea, tobacco, and coffee. Others have drawn critical attention to drug use and colonial labor relations. Warf, for example, argues that cannabis supported British colonial power. Drawing on James Mill's *Cannabis Britannica*, he argues that, from 1793 to the 1850s, the British East India Company profited handsomely from cannabis taxes and licensing fees in South Asia. In some areas, distributors were required to store cannabis in government-owned warehouses. Additionally, cannabis farmers were policed to prevent them from avoiding taxes.[40] Anticipating the contemporary regulatory scheme in California, in colonial India cannabis generated tax revenues and helped anchor forms of state and corporate power.

Cannabis has also served as a painkiller, and a source of sustaining pleasure, that enables workers to work. Warf's account of cannabis and British colonialism in the Caribbean provides a revealing lens for thinking about cannabis in contemporary California:

> Drugs were important in several colonizers' attempts to compel local populations to produce export goods vital to the world economy. Alcohol was (a) common labor pacifier in tropical plantations. In the 19th century, British authorities brought 1.5 million "surplus" laborers from India to labor-short islands in the Caribbean. Indentured Indian workers brought ganja with them to Barbados and Jamaica after the abolition of slavery there in 1834, and it was tolerated so long as sugar production did not suffer (Angrosino 2003). Ganja's use was closely wrapped up with that of rum, so that the two drugs became intertwined in the cycle of work, debt, and poverty that characterized latifundial life on the sugar plantation, an excellent demonstration of colonial biopolitics.[41]

While different in so many ways, this historical example is a challenging template for understanding the contemporary context of legal cannabis in California. Historically, cannabis has oiled the wheels of state power and capitalism, providing revenue and profits; served as an alibi for state regulation and policing; and functioned as a kind of life support for laboring bodies that makes their exploitation possible. Legal cannabis has produced new jobs, but most of them are low wage work.[42] At the bottom, migrant agricultural laborers are the most vulnerable to exploitation and the occupational health hazards of growing and processing cannabis.[43] For workers both inside and outside the industry, cannabis dulls pain, relieves boredom, and provides a bit of pleasure.



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-35.jpeg>

Figure 34. The screened-in entry to the Teds Budz warehouse, where workers take smoke breaks, around the corner from the block where the zombie dance scenes in Michael Jackson's "Thriller" video was shot. Photo by author.

In this regard, Teds Budz once again mirrors its working-class Black and brown consumers. When I arrive at the warehouse for our 10 a.m. interview, before we start Lewis briefly disappears saying "let me get a joint," and he returns with a zeppelin. There's no smoking in the warehouse, so we go out to the small entryway behind a rusted industrial screen door. I sit on a folding chair and he sits on a stool as he lights up, flicking ashes into a coffee can (Figure 34). For a moment I worry about what I will do when he passes it to me. How will I take notes and then drive back to my hotel? But that moment never comes, and he slowly smokes it down while answering my questions, pausing once to hit an asthma inhaler. When the joint was done, so was the interview. In keeping with the utopian, gifting culture of cannabis, Lewis then gave me a "Spidey-Ted" T-shirt and several mylar bags of weed. As I left I encountered a young brown woman worker from the packing room smoking a joint in the entryway. Despite stereotypes of the couch-locked stoner, in practice cannabis serves as a stimulus to work, with consumers debating which strains promote mental focus and energy for physical activity. These connections between work and cannabis are suggested by advertising. A 2020 content analysis of online product descriptions from retailers in six states (including California) found that cannabis was most often promoted for stress relief; for focus, energy, and productivity; and for pain and depression.[44] The painkilling and pleasure-producing effects of cannabis enable workers to reproduce their labor power through cannabis recreation. It is similar to vehicles of transport, which also take Black and brown people to work. One Teds Budz packing room worker, for example, regularly posts Instagram videos of their drive to and from the warehouse. Transport can also be dangerous. Lewis used to drive to Oakland weekly and told me about an incident where San Joaquin Valley police confiscated his cash, cannabis, and laptop. Studying

cannabis commodity aesthetics thus makes visible the contradictions between work and the good life, drawing critical attention to the gap between where working-class Black and Latinx people want to be and where they are now.

Cannabis Futurity

Cannabis sustains Black and Latinx lives and freedom dreams that draw into critical relief the material limits of the present while also incorporating Black and Latinx consumers and workers into racial capitalism. Such contradictions will remain so long as the material conditions that help produce them remain, making the abolition of racial capitalism the horizon of futurity for cannabis users and so many others. Among other things this would mean abolishing the racialized criminalization of the so-called "black market." But in the meantime, how can cannabis culture be made less damaging and more sustaining for Black and Latinx cannabis workers and consumers?

Like other US states, California legalized cannabis on the commercial model of alcohol, whereas a variety of non-profit regimes, including state monopolies, could have been pursued instead. While it would bring its own challenges and problems, a state monopoly on cannabis sales would remove the profit motive.[45] If treated like a public good and provided at lower cost, cannabis would be a more affordable support for Black and Latinx working-class lives. But since legalization, the cat is out of the mylar bag, and, recalling alcohol lobbyists, the corporate interests behind commercial cannabis have more money and hence influence over how cannabis is sold than any possible advocates for non-profit weed.

By contrast, the unionization of California cannabis workers is not a pipe dream but a growing reality. Located in California's Inland Empire, Teamsters 1932 Cannabis Workers Union organizes cannabis agricultural workers, packing facility workers, budtenders, and delivery drivers.[46] Local 1932 revises the Teamsters

logo of twin horse heads above a wagon wheel by adding a cannabis leaf (Figure 35). Historically, the teamsters have organized truckers and transportation workers, and its recent success unionizing cannabis delivery drivers in pursuit of living wages and safe working conditions recalls the prevalence of cars in cannabis advertising and the desires for freedom they represent. Teamsters similarly articulate gas-powered vehicles to dreams of mobility and transcendence for racialized, low-wage workers.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-36.jpg>

Figure 35. Logo for Teamsters Local 1932, Cannabis Division. Screenshot by author.

With its "Cannabis Workers Rising" campaign, the United Food and Commercial Workers have organized tens of thousands of workers in dispensaries, labs, delivery services, kitchens, manufacturing, processing, and grow facilities across the United States. The union has won contracts providing job protections, wage increases, holiday pay, retirement benefits, and safer working conditions.[47] In

California, hundreds of cannabis workers in Orange and Los Angeles Counties have joined the UFCW. The Union's website page about cannabis features a woman of color worker at the South Coast Safe Access in Santa Ana who is represented by UFCW Local 324. The population of Santa Ana is over 75% Latinx, and so Local 324 is made up of large numbers of Latinx workers, including its cannabis division, and South Coast Safe Access largely serves a working-class Latinx clientele. Indeed, every UFCW Cannabis Newsletter spotlights Black and Latinx women and men who serve as dispensary shop stewards and union organizers (Figures 36–37). Local 324 has also joined the Orange County Labor Federation in hosting clinics to help people expunge records of cannabis crimes as enabled under Proposition 64. As the union website explains, "we see these efforts as an important part of addressing and changing the historical inequities and racism of the War on Drugs."[48] Whereas social equity licenses and DEI marketing do little for cannabis workers, unionization has produced tangible benefits, with wages for union jobs ranging from 10.8–32.4% higher than nonunion jobs in the industry.

April 2023 Issue 5
UFCW 324
Cannabis Division newsletter

Shaye Reed Says Its All About Respect

"It was pretty much the final incident. After that I knew I had to leave," said Shaye Reed recalling the last of three non-union cannabis dispensaries where she worked prior to landing her current union job at Catalyst in Bellflower. She wasted no time before volunteering to be a steward. Her enthusiasm and desire to learn led to her current position as a Special Project Union Representative for Local 324.

Being a SPUR has given Shaye a chance to share her past experience and become a vocal advocate for union membership.

Shaye believes that she, like most people, are willing to put up with a lot of adversity before leaving a job. The incident that changed things for her happened when she was a budtender helping a customer examine product one evening right as the store was about to close.

She and the customer were alone on the sales floor as she handed him small plastic containers that allowed him to sniff the product to test its quality. But sniffing marijuana buds in tightly packed display boxes wasn't sufficient as he demanded to hold the cannabis samples in his hands.

City and state laws prohibit cannabis from being outside its packaging on the sales floor. When Shaye insisted he follow the law, the man violently jerked the samples out of her hands and declared he would do it his way. Shaye was able to alert the store manager without raising alarm bells with the increasingly belligerent customer.

When the transaction was complete, the manager called her to the backroom to discuss what had happened. "I was expecting a 'hey are you OK. That was intense' or something that showed they had my back," she said recalling

the incident. "But she just looked at me and said, 'you could have handled that better'."

There was no signal of support or reassurance of any kind. "She wanted the sale and the cash in the register. They didn't care about me."

Today, Shaye places respect at the top of her list of job requirements.

She takes great pride in being part of a Labor Movement that is bringing the union difference to a previously unregulated industry.

Like many in the cannabis industry, Shaye possesses a vast knowledge of the products she sells ranging from where and how it was cultivated to the ailments it relieves.

"I think the union is adding respect to the job. That means a lot to me," she said. That respect goes beyond the shop floor and into her personal chemistry, a fact that has made her work as a SPUR a profoundly rewarding experience.

"I have been able to explain to a lot of workers that they don't have to accept bad treatment as part of the job. They deserve respect and it's not some great fantasy that's out of reach," Shaye said. Conveying that simple message has been the highlight of her time as a SPUR. It has grown into a personal motto she believes will stay with her long past the day she returns to the sales floor at Catalyst.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-37.jpg>

Public perception of cannabis isn't going to change without the union.
Ciara Hall
Special Project Union Representative
Catalyst, Belmont Shore
Ciara Hall set out to find a union job —It led her to Local 324
Only four years ago, 26-year-old Ciara Hall was on a different track, with different scenery. Life as a University of Florida student was a lot simpler, she said sharing some memories of the town of Gainesville. The sale and recreational use of cannabis was not widely accepted in this part of the country.
"Cops would have a field day waiting around on the main roads to the University just so they could pull over people for being high," she said, describing an atmosphere that today seems at odds with the national trend.
Florida has legalized marijuana for medicinal purposes, but even that small step hasn't been wholly embraced by local authorities throughout the state. Ciara paints a picture of a politically conservative environment that shows little sign of changing anytime soon.
It was largely due to the stifling atmosphere that Ciara decided to make a change by moving to California.
She has great pride in her decision to work in the cannabis industry under the protection of a labor union. Unlike most of her colleagues at Catalyst in Belmont Shore, Ciara had extensive knowledge about unions and purposely looked to find a union job in the field.
Her enthusiasm for Labor came largely from watching her former boyfriend's experience with the Teamsters and the role it played after he was injured on the job.
"They stuck by him from beginning to end, making sure everything got taken care of. I knew that was what I wanted," Ciara aid, reciting some of what made her gravitate toward her current job. It was also her experience working in non-licensed shops the previous two years that soured her on the kind of fly-by-night facilities that seem in a perpetual state of chaos.
Ciara's job as a budtender has provided a level of stability that belies the typical transient nature of most retail positions. She took on the role of shop steward after only a year. Her current six-month assignment as a Special Project Union Rep at Local 324 has polished her credentials as the go-to person for co-workers.
Her training has focused largely on organizing tactics and strategies to prepare for a major campaign to sign up new workers in the spring and summer. Ciara has already claimed a signature issue that will be her battle cry as she shares her story with potential members—respect.
Ciara's experience with friends and family here and back in Florida has helped shape her view on the subject. She has grown frustrated with what she sees as a continuing stigma attached to the industry and, by extension, the jobs that are its backbone. Ciara and fellow SPURs say that they simply don't get the credit they deserve for positions that require a vast knowledge of important facts about the product they sell.
She feels that the union is the only way the public perception will change and extend to budtenders, among others, the respect they earn daily.
She clearly sees her role as a steward and as a SPUR as an opportunity to make a difference. She looks forward daily to helping co-workers navigate the unpredictable situations in an industry that is still considered to be in its infancy.
Ciara enjoys taking on challenges without predictable outcomes. That is the part of her personality that gave her the courage to pack up her life and move from one coast to another.
Ciara knows that with five months left on her assignment as a SPUR, she will have many days that have uncertain outcomes. But she said that her experience so far has been empowering because of the role she plays in determining her own future—that couldn't be done without the union.
"I don't get to dictate the events that play out every day, but I'm not an innocent bystander," she said.
2
Eric Foster has been 'the face of marijuana' for thousands over the years
Eric Foster, Local 324's newest Cannabis Special Project Union Representative (SPUR) seems to put most people at ease from the beginning.
Starting with "hello," Eric showers new acquaintances with positive vibes, creating an atmosphere that makes them want to stay in his presence.
Friends and admirers aren't the only people who have noticed his penchant for making others feel at home in any environment. Management at Chronic Pain Releaf Center in Long Beach knew right away he was the man they wanted to be the first impression to the public.
The center put him in charge of signing up new customers, a job he has had for years. Those who come to the facility and are not yet repeat customers are directed to Eric.
As required by state law, he verifies identification, and records basic profile information before they are added to the data bank and formally accepted as members.
"I'm the smiling face that everyone gets to meet first," he said matter-of-factly.
In an age where cannabis companies are in ferocious competition for clientele, branding and reputation are essential elements in a company's business plan. It's hard to understate the benefit of making a positive first impression, a skill Eric has mastered over the years. Eric has about 16 years experience in the cannabis industry, the last 14 of which have been at Chronic Pain Releaf Center.
He was one of the originals when the facility voted to unionize in 2017. Today, Eric wears the pro-union banner on his shirt sleeve, talking up the benefits of membership to anyone who will listen. It wasn't always like that.
"I was not one of the union's big supporters when they first came in," Eric recalls, slowing down his pace slightly. "I had to be convinced."
He quickly realized that it wasn't just about paying dues every month. When he took the time to examine the benefits that come with a union contract, he was sold.
The tangible pluses come in the form of affordable health insurance, accrued vacation and sick leave. Most important, Eric, like many of his colleagues in the industry, believes that the increased respect and legitimacy the union is providing the profession is chief among its many benefits.
"You tell people you work for a dispensary, and they sort of nod or roll their eyes," Eric said. "But once you tell them you are a fully-union shop, they perk up and take notice."
Eric is keen at looking into the future, both for himself and the industry. He sees the union expanding its influence in the area as more workers sign up and exercise their rights. For those already active, he sees advantages, such as potential retirement benefits, as a goal within reach.
The word "retirement" sparks a surprising reaction. At 50 years old, Eric said he never contemplated a time when he wouldn't be punching a timecard. "I always saw myself working till I drop," he said, followed by his signature laugh. "But now I'm starting to think maybe I will have a few years left at the end when I can sit back and enjoy the rewards."
He credits the union for helping make that daydream possible. During his six-months as a SPUR, he hopes to ignite plenty more daydreams for workers who haven't joined the union ranks.
"It's not really a hard sell," Eric said, looking back on what convinced him to switch sides. "All you have to do is look at the facts."
I wasn't one of the union's biggest supporters... I had to be convinced.
Eric Foster
Special Project Union Representative
Chronic Pain Releaf Center
3

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Fig-38.jpg>

Figures 36–37. UFCW 324 Cannabis Division newsletter.

Jose Muñoz suggestively developed his theory of futurity out of an examination of a union. In "The Future Is in the Present: Sexual Avant-Gardes and the Performance of Utopia," he analyzed performances containing "an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present." Following C.L.R. James he calls such performances "the enactment of . . . a future in the present." The title of James's volume, *The Future in the Present*, according to Muñoz, "riffs on an aspect of Hegelian dialectics suggesting that the affirmation known as the future is contained within its negation, the present." One of James's examples is "an actually existing socialist reality in the present": "In one department of a certain plant in the US there is a worker who is physically incapable of carrying out his duties. But he is a man with a wife and children and his condition is due to the strain of previous work in the plant. The workers have organized their work so

that for ten years he has had practically nothing to do."[49] Muñoz draws on James's account of factory workers as "social performers" in order to "read the world-making potentialities contained in the performances of minoritarian citizen subjects who contest the majoritarian public sphere."[50] The shop floor where workers partly socialize their labor in support of one another resembles the collectivist orientation of cannabis unions. Muñoz's performance theory thus helps make cannabis unions visible as "anticipatory illuminations" of better worlds, or performances of the future in the present.[51]

Notes

1. See Monte Staton, Brian Kaskie, and Julie Bobitt, "The Changing Cannabis Culture Among Older Americans: High Hopes for Chronic Pain Relief," *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy* 29, no. 4 (2022): 382–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/09687637.2022.2028728 < https://doi.org/10.1080/09687637.2022.2028728> .

2. I build on the tradition of cultural studies research focused on the contradictions of commodifying racialized popular cultures such as music, food, and fashion. While an exhaustive survey of that extensive body of scholarship is beyond the scope of this essay, here I would emphasize my debt to Stuart Hall's analysis of how at one and the same time, Black popular culture remains connected to everyday Black lives, desires, and fantasies while being vulnerable to co-optation and commercialization. See Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (Routledge, 1996), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203993262 < https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203993262> .

3. Steven W. Bender, "The Colors of Cannabis: Reflections on the Racial Justice Implications of California's Proposition 64," *UC Davis Law Review Online* 11 (2016): 12.

4. For the history of cannabis prohibition, see Dominic Corva and Joshua S. Meisel, "Introduction to Post-Prohibition," in *The Routledge Handbook of Post-Prohibition Cannabis Research*, ed. Dominic Corva and Joshua Meisel (Routledge, 2021), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429320491 < https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429320491> . See also Curtis Marez, *Drug Wars: The Political Economy of Narcotics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 105–222.

5. Barney Warf, "High Points: An Historical Geography of Cannabis," *Geographical Review* 104, no. 4 (2014): 416, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1931-0846.2014.12038.x < https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1931-0846.2014.12038.x> .

6. “Proposition 64: The Adult Use of Marijuana Act,” Judicial Council of California, https://www.courts.ca.gov/prop64.htm < https://www.courts.ca.gov/prop64.htm> .

7. Corva and Meisel, “Introduction to Post-Prohibition,” 1–2.

8. Kaitlin Reed, “Cannabis, Settler Colonialism, and Tribal Sovereignty in California,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Post-Prohibition Cannabis Research*, ed. Dominic Corva and Joshua S. Meisel (Routledge, 2021), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429320491 < https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429320491> .

9. Bender, “Colors of Cannabis,” 13–14, and 17–18.

10. See Beau Kilmer, Jonathan P. Caulkins, Michelle Kilborn, Michelle Priest, and Kristen M. Warren, “Cannabis Legalization and Social Equity: Some Opportunities, Puzzles, and Trade-Offs,” *Boston Law Review* 101, no. 1003 (2021): 1003–41; Rebecca Brown, “Cannabis Social Equity: An Opportunity for the Revival of Affirmative Action in California,” *Social Justice and Equity Law Journal* 3, no. 1 (2019): 205–47; and Y. Tony Yang, Carla J. Berg, and Scott Burris, “Cannabis Equity Initiatives: Progress, Problems, and Potentials,” *American Journal of Public Health* 113, no. 5 (2023): 487–89).

11. “Cannabis Equity,” California Department of Cannabis Control, https://cannabis.ca.gov/resources/equity < https://cannabis.ca.gov/resources/equity/> .

12. By one estimate the startup cost for a new cannabis dispensary is $240,000. Yang, Berg, and Burris, “Cannabis Equity Initiatives,” 488.

13. Yang, Berg, and Burris claim that 80% of cannabis businesses are white owned. Yang, Berg, and Burris, “Cannabis Equity Initiatives,” 487.

14. “Ciencia Labs, the Next Generation of Cannabis Brands and IP,” https://ciencialabs.com < https://ciencialabs.com> ; “Humo: Where There’s Fuego, There’s Humo,” https://www.gethumo.com < https://www.gethumo.com> ; Jessica MacAulay, “Humo’s Susie Plascencia on Cannabis in the Latino Community,” *Clio*, May 26, 2022, https://musebycl.io/higher-calling/humos-susie-plascencia-cannabis-latino-community < https://musebycl.io/higher-calling/humos-susie-plascencia-cannabis-latino-community> ; and “Dope Flavors Products: Dr. Che,” https://www.dopeflavorsllc.com/products < https://www.dopeflavorsllc.com/products> .

15. “Monogram’s De Watson is Repping for the Dignity of Cannabis Culture,” *Mary Jane*, November 15, 2021, https://merryjane.com/culture/monograms-de-watson-is-repping-for-the-dignity-of-cannabis-culture < https://merryjane.com/culture/monograms-de-watson-is-repping-for-the-dignity-of-cannabis-culture> ; and Michelle Lhooq, “Inside Jay-Z’s Weed Lab,” *GQ*, April 19, 2021, https://www.gq.com/story/jay-z-monogram-cannabis-tour < https://www.gq.com/story/jay-z-monogram-cannabis-tour> .

16. Adam Tschorn, “This Athlete’s Weed Side Hustle Turned into a Movement to Change L.A.’s Cannabis Scene,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 2021, https://www.latimes.com/lifestyle/story/2021-09-09/how-chris-ball-went-from-

professional-football-to-pot-farm < https://www.latimes.com/lifestyle/story/2021-09-09/how-chris-ball-went-from-professional-football-to-pot-farm> .

17. "Mission," *Josephine and Billies*, https://www.josephineandbillies.com/our-mission/ < https://www.josephineandbillies.com/our-mission/> .

18. "Queen Latifah Invests in Sixty Four & Hope, Creating Wealth for 21 Entrepreneurs from South LA," *Mary Magazine*, December 21, 2021, https://www.mary-magazine.com/business/queen-latifah-invests-in-sixty-four-hope-creating-wealth-for-21-entrepreneurs-from-south-la < https://www.mary-magazine.com/business/queen-latifah-invests-in-sixty-four-hope-creating-wealth-for-21-entrepreneurs-from-south-la/> .

19. Quoted by Ayoka Medlock-Nurse, *Racial Capitalism and the African American Experience Entering the Cannabis Industry* (Walden University, 2021), 124.

20. Bootleg Kev, "Berner: Cookies Clothing does 55 Million a Year," *YouTube*, September 28, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RuWTlf8M2J4 < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RuWTlf8M2J4> .

21. "Social Impact," Cookies Company, https://impact.cookies.co < https://impact.cookies.co> .

22. Berner, quoted by Javier Hasse, "How Berner Built a Half-A-Billion Dollar Cannabis Empire*, Forbes*, September 16, 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/javierhasse/2020/09/16/berner/?sh=660efbb7541d < https://www.forbes.com/sites/javierhasse/2020/09/16/berner/?sh=660efbb7541d> .

23. Berner415, "Cookies U," *YouTube*, June 17, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEjZhskYC6E < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEjZhskYC6E> .

24. "Cookies U," *Social Impact,* https://impact.cookies.co/cookiesu; "Cookies Impact," *Instagram*, https://www.instagram.com/cookiesimpact < https://www.instagram.com/cookiesimpact/> ; "Cookies Campus," *Instagram,* https://www.instagram.com/cookies_campus < https://www.instagram.com/cookies_campus/> ; "Cookies Tree Lounge," https://www.instagram.com/cookiestreelounge < https://www.instagram.com/cookiestreelounge/> .

25. "Cookies U," https://impact.cookies.co/cookiesu < https://impact.cookies.co/cookiesu> .

26. Marty Otañez, "A Labor Studies Approach to Cannabis," in *The Routledge Handbook of Post-Prohibition Cannabis Research*, ed. Dominic Corva and Joshua S. Meisel (Routledge, 2021), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429320491 < https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429320491> .

27. "Cookies Reviews," *Glassdoor,* https://www.glassdoor.com/Reviews/Cookies-Reviews-E3117692_P3.htm?filter.iso3Language=eng < https://www.glassdoor.com/Reviews/Cookies-Reviews-E3117692_P3.htm?

filter.iso3Language=eng> ; and “Cookies Reviews,” *Indeed*, https://www.indeed.com/cmp/Cookies/reviews < https://www.indeed.com/cmp/Cookies/reviews> .

28. Quoted by Hasse, “How Berner Built a Half-A-Billion Dollar Cannabis Empire.”

29. Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society* (Polity Press, 1986), 19.

30. “Top California Cannabis Distributors: Teds Budz,” *LA Weekly*, January 14, 2022, https://www.laweekly.com/california-cannabis-distributors/ < https://www.laweekly.com/california-cannabis-distributors/> .

31. Theo Lewis interview, September 21, 2023.

32. Lewis interview.

33. Interview with Jacqueline Wallace, September 21, 2023.

34. California dispensaries are generally excluded from areas with high home values and tend to be clustered in low-income areas. See Chris Morrison, Paul J. Gruenewald, Bridget Freisthler, William R. Ponicki, and Lillian G. Remer, “The Economic Geography of Medical Cannabis Dispensaries in California,” *International Journal of Drug Policy* 25, no. 3 (2014): 508–15, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2013.12.009 < https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2013.12.009> .

35. Lewis interview.

36. Salvador Zárate, “Migrant Labor and a Life Under Fire: A Triptych,” *Living Through Upheaval*, University of California Humanities Research Institute, June 2022, https://uchri.org/foundry/migrant-labor-and-a-life-under-fire-a-triptych < https://uchri.org/foundry/migrant-labor-and-a-life-under-fire-a-triptych/> .

37. Shana Klein, *The Fruits of Empire: Art, Food, and the Politics of Race in the Age of American Expansion* (University of California Press, 2020), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203421222 < https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203421222%C2%A0> .

38. Cannabis Talk 101, “Theodore Lewis & Anthony Garcia of Teds Budz Distribution Co. | Cannabis Talk 101,” *YouTube*, October 18, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHscP6T-kac < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHscP6T-kac> .

39. Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, 20.

40. Warf, “High Points,” 426, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1931-0846.2014.12038.x < https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1931-0846.2014.12038.x> .

41. Warf, “High Points,” 428. See also William R. Jankowiak and Daniel Bradburd, *Drugs, Labor, and Colonial Expansion* (University of Arizona Press, 2003), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2rcnqn9 < https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2rcnqn9%C2%A0> ; and Marez, *Drug Wars*.

42. Otañez, "A Labor Studies Approach to Cannabis," 176. ↩

43. Marc B. Schenker and Chelsea E. Langer, "Health and Safety of Cannabis Workers," in *The Routledge Handbook of Post-Prohibition Cannabis Research*, ed. Dominic Corva and Joshua S. Meisel (Routledge, 2021), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429320491 < https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429320491> ; Stella Beckman, Xóchitl Castañeda, Vania del Rivero, Anaisabel Chavez, and Marc B. Schenker, "Experiences of Structural Violence and Wage Theft Among Immigrant Workers in the California Cannabis Industry," *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 12, no. 3 (2023): 127–40, https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2023.123.014 < https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2023.123.014> ; and Otañez, "A Labor Studies Approach to Cannabis," 176–77. ↩

44. Mary H. Luc, Samantha W. Tsang, Johannes Thrul, Ryan D. Kennedy, and Meghan B. Moran, "Content Analysis of Online Product Descriptions from Cannabis Retailers in Six US States," *International Journal of Drug Policy* 75 (2020): 102593, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2019.10.017 < https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2019.10.017> . ↩

45. Tom Decorte, *Regulating Cannabis: A Detailed Scenario for a Nonprofit Cannabis Market* (Archway Publishing, 2016). ↩

46. "Teamsters 1932 Cannabis Worker's Union," https://teamsterscann.org/about < https://teamsterscann.org/about> . ↩

47. "Cannabis Union," UFCW, https://www.ufcw.org/who-we-represent/cannabis < https://www.ufcw.org/who-we-represent/cannabis/> . ↩

48. "Community Advocacy," UFCW 324, https://ufcw324.org/cannabisdivision/communityadvocacy < https://ufcw324.org/cannabisdivision/communityadvocacy/> . ↩

49. José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009), 30, https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479868780.001.0001 < https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479868780.001.0001> . ↩

50. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 49. ↩

51. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 55–56. ↩

Author Information

Curtis Marez

A professor in the UC San Diego Ethnic Studies Department, Curtis Marez is the author of *Drug Wars: The Political Economy of Narcotics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), *Farm Worker Futurism: Speculative Technologies of Resistance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), *University Babylon: Film and Race Politics on Campus* (UC Press, 2019), and *Producing Precarity: The Costs of Making TV in Poor Places* (NYU Press, Spring 2025). Along with Lisa Duggan he edits American Studies Now, a UC Press book series. Curtis is the former editor of *American Quarterly*, past president of the American Studies Association:, and the Vice Chair of the UC Press Faculty Editorial Board. He's currently working on a book about Cheech and Chong.

View all of Curtis Marez's articles.

Article details

Curtis Marez, "Cannaboom: Race and Labor in California Cannabis Cultures," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.4

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

BTS and the Labor of Techno-Orientalism

by Julia H. Lee | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

ABSTRACT This article makes the case that the discourse around K-pop supergroup BTS and their fans—known as ARMY—marks an intersection between techno-Orientalism, the abstraction and demonization of Asian labor, and Korea in the US imperial imaginary. BTS exemplifies what I suggest is a contemporary form of Asian racialization that emphasizes the Asian figure as embodying a series of seeming contradictions between the synthetic/mechanistic and the undeveloped/primordial. BTS reveals the ways that these threads of racialization do not contradict but rather complement each other, explaining how narratives marveling at the group's technical proficiency/synchronicity/productivity can exist side by side with suggestions that their musical output is the result of a labor that is denigrated because it is perceived as being mechanized, abstract, and devoid of the qualities of artistry and creativity exclusively associated with Western modernity.

KEYWORDS music, popular culture, racialization, techno-Orientalism

Introduction

On June 2, 2021, Tom Breihan published an article titled "BTS and Their Fan Army Are Rendering the Pop Charts Useless," on StereoGum.com, a website devoted to music news and commentary. In the piece Breihan argued that BTS's just-released single "Butter," which debuted at the #1 spot on the *Billboard* Hot 100 and proceeded to stay there for a total of ten non-consecutive weeks, did not deserve that coveted position.[1] Breihan noted that *Billboard* calculates its Hot 100 list based on a combination of radio play, streaming, and sales, including

downloads. Because “Butter” had a negligible presence on US radio waves (an omission that Breihan doesn’t address) and respectable but not overwhelming streaming numbers, Breihan attributed “Butter’s” ascendance to the top of the Hot 100 almost entirely to BTS fans—widely known as ARMY, “Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth”—purchasing and repurchasing the $.69 single as well as six other digital versions that the band released, sales of which were aggregated to arrive at the #1 ranking. It is this fact—that ARMY was buying “Butter” multiply and across different versions—that drove Breihan to declare that “‘Butter’ is not the most popular song in America right now.”[2] Brehan argues that BTS’s and ARMY’s manipulation of the *Billboard* charting system gives “a completely distorted idea of how popular BTS is.”[3] Breihan goes on to state that “organic popularity, once the driving force behind pop music, barely feels like it exists anymore. Instead, the pop charts are turning into a battlefield for warring stan armies.”[4]

Breihan was not the only critic to complain about the “distorted popularity” of BTS or invoke the band’s use of “warring stan armies” to establish its musical dominance. Mark Grondin, a YouTube creator and music critic, echoed Breihan’s rhetoric when he stated that the popularity of “Butter” was about “the furthest thing from” “organic” one could imagine.[5] Grondin followed up with a lament, asking are we “really now at the point [that] to prop up a band’s popularity to the general public the label has convinced stans to buy multiple copies of the exact same song?”[6] In an article for *Slate*, critic Chris Molanphy conceded that the song’s performance on the Hot 100 was the result of “legitimate chart math,” but declared that unlike previous #1 Billboard summer hits—“‘California Girls,’ ‘Call Me Maybe,’ ‘Blurred Lines,’ ‘One Dance,’ ‘Despacito,’ and ‘Old Town Road’”—“Butter” is a “song fewer *Americans* than ever are likely to have heard.”[7] Earlier that summer, Molanphy referred to “Butter” as a “Potemkin village of a hit, propped up by its faithful ARMY.”[8]

What interests me about this hand-wringing isn't the attempt to preserve the fiction that rankings like the *Billboard* Hot 100 are an authentic reflection of musical taste,[9] but rather the pervasiveness of a discourse that insists that BTS's music isn't "organic," that the group's success is the result of "chart math," or that their chart-topping hits are an illegitimate sham propped up by the manipulations of the group or its fans. The *OED* defines "organic" as a quality that is "inherent in a living being" or "natural," "characterized by connection or coordination of parts into a single, harmonious whole," or "relating to or designating compounds which exist naturally as constituents of living organisms." Breihan and Grondin's characterizations of the US pop charts as historically an expression of "organic" popularity and BTS's rise as an indicator of the group's "inorganic" nature suggests that there is something inherently inhuman or unwholesome about BTS, their music, and the fans' support of them; this robotic quality in turn has disrupted the heretofore "organic" rhythms and measures of the US music industry. These types of charges will be familiar to anyone with a knowledge of Asian American history because they index some of the most prevalent forms of Asian racialization in the twenty-first century. They indicate the extent to which BTS—who are Korean in origin and global in their appeal—is nevertheless still subject to the disciplines of Asian racial formation within the United States. Despite their stated commitment to their Korean identity and their interest in globalizing K-pop,[10] once the group entered the spaces of US domestic culture (and it did so at a relatively early point in its history, with the 2014 docuseries *American Hustle Life*), BTS became subject to the racializing discourses that have dominated the nation's approach to Asians in the US for the past 150 years.

It is important to note, however, that the particular form of Asian racialization that BTS has been subject to over the past decade is distinct from the more familiar yellow peril or model minority narratives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This article makes the case that the discourse around K-pop more broadly and BTS in particular marks an intersection between techno-Orientalism, the abstraction and demonization of Asian labor, and Korea in the US imperial

imaginary. In the case of BTS, whose members are RM (Kim Nam-joon), Jin (Kim Seokjin), Suga (Min Yoongi), J-Hope (Jung Hoseok), Jimin (Park Jimin), V (Kim Taehyung), and Jungkook (Jeon Jungkook), these threads of racialization do not contradict but rather complement each other, explaining why both positive and critical assessments of the group tend to emphasize the groups technical exemplarity (as well as the technological savvy of their fanbase) even as they express skepticism about the group's "real" popularity. In making this argument, I will not be focusing on the more overt and typical acts of racist, sexist, and homophobic aggression to which the members are frequently subject, although I am certainly not discounting them as acts of violence and exclusion."[11] Rather, my focus is on how popular discourse around the success of K-pop and BTS engages in techno-Orientalist tropes that marvel at the technical proficiency of K-pop performers and the K-pop industry while at the same time denigrating their labor and their artistic output as mechanized, abstract, and devoid of the qualities of creativity exclusively associated with Western modernity. This assessment also applies to ARMY, who are frequently impugned as "bots" or "15-year-old girls,"[12] despite the documented diversity of the fandom.[13] My point is that this particular narrative of Asian racial formation is pervasive in US culture and that its very omnipresence is made all the clearer by the fact that it is applied so persistently to BTS. As the biggest K-pop band in the world, BTS isn't an exception to techno-Orientalist logic, in other words, but rather the sign of its ubiquity.

I conclude this essay with a brief exploration of how COVID-19 informed BTS's racialization in the US. It is motivated by a seeming paradox: how did a boy band from Korea become the most popular musical group in the United States at the height of a pandemic that witnessed a surge in and awareness of anti-Asian violence and racism?[14] I would argue that BTS's heightened acclaim and visibility at the very moment that saw a huge spike in overt acts of physical and rhetorical violence against Asians is not a sign of the nation's desire to envision or provide a more just future for its racially marginalized inhabitants. Rather, BTS's rise during

COVID-19 suggests that the pandemic intensified the association between Asian racial formation and techno-Orientalist and colonized labor.

Techno-Orientalism and the Un-Representable

In their influential volume, David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu define techno-Orientalism as "the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in *hypo*– or *hyper*technological terms in cultural productions and political discourse."[15] I'll be returning to the dichotomous aspect of techno-Orientalism later in this article, but for now, I'll note that the term is most frequently used to characterize Asia as a site of "high technology, enforced consumption, and excessive advertising."[16] Both Orientalism and techno-Orientalism reflect the geopolitical anxieties of the West in the eras in which they respectively emerged. Nevertheless, although techno-Orientalism has its roots in Edward Said's theorizations of Orientalism, the "Orient" of Said's Orientalism is markedly different from the "Orient" of techno-Orientalism. Orientalism spoke of an Orient whose "great moments were in the past," and whose residents were only useful "in the modern world" due to the West's efforts to "[bring] them out of the wretchedness of their decline and [turn] them into rehabilitated residents of productive colonies."[17] Media scholar Toshiya Ueno notes that "if the Orient was constructed and invented by the West to build up its cultural identity, then the Techno-Orient has been invented to define the image and models of information capitalism and the information society."[18] Further, techno-Orientalism represents a reorientation of the temporal relationship embedded in Orientalism; as David Morley and Kevin Robins note, Orientalism's "traditional equation of the West with modernity and of the Orient with the exotic (but underdeveloped) past is thrown into crisis as the dynamic hub of the world economy is increasingly perceived to have moved from the Atlantic to the Pacific Rim."[19] Roh, Huang, and Niu argue that, "while Orientalism defines a

modern West by producing an oppositional and premodern East, techno-Orientalism symmetrically and yet contradictorily completes this project by creating a collusive, futurized Asia to further reaffirm the West's centrality."[20] This is an important aspect of techno-Orientalist discourse: as much as it expresses the West's anxieties about a technological Asia, it also affirms the West's superiority vis-à-vis Asia since it assumes that the industrial advances introduced during occupation and colonization created the conditions for the techno-Orient's rise. Roh, Huang, and Niu point to the underlying threat that the technological Orient represents: "the Orient is now, in a sense, more West than the West, a simulacrum that threatens the foundational fiction of the West as Future."[21]

While techno-Orientalism first emerged in response to an economically surging Japan, it has for the past few decades been increasingly applied to China. The techno-Orientalist narrative that the "simulacrum" of the "East" has coopted the modernity that rightly belongs to the "West" is particularly on display in the way that the economic relationship between China and the United States is constructed. Lok Siu and Claire Chun, in their article analyzing the impact of techno-Orientalism on anti-Chinese discourse in the twenty-first century, argue that the "racial trope of the Chinese 'scientist-as spy'—quite resonant of the 'evil criminal genius' of the fictional character Dr. Fu Manchu," has become the most visible manifestation of yellow peril discourse in the last two decades.[22] Whereas Sinophobia of the early twentieth century tended to imagine Chinese villainy through activities such as drug or human trafficking, contemporary yellow peril narratives represent the Chinese as engaging in scientific espionage in order to capitalize on a "global market driven by scientific-technological innovation."[23] The techno-Orientalist strain of yellow peril discourse is perhaps most visible in the numerous prosecutions of Chinese American or Chinese diasporic scientists for stealing US trade or governmental secrets.[24] Even scientists of non-Chinese descent have come under suspicion for spying if they are seen as working too closely with Chinese academic or industrial institutions.[25] The steady drumbeat of these stories, along with more spectacular ones like the Chinese spy balloon that

floated over the United States in the summer of 2023, contribute to a generalized impression that the Chinese will go to any lengths in order to spy on or steal American technological discoveries.

While I agree with Siu and and Chun that the Chinese scientist has become the contemporary figure of yellow peril hysteria, I would argue that what is characteristic of Asian racialization in the twenty-first century is the bifurcation between hyper and hypo that techno-Orientalism contains. What defines these narratives for me is the juxtaposition between Chinese skill in using and stealing advanced technology and their seeming inability to develop that technology on their own. In a *New York Times* investigative article on the topic of Chinese technological espionage, reporter Yudhijit Bhattacharjee explains how, in a "kind of delicious reversal," the FBI were able to identify and capture a Chinese spymaster because of his extensive use of his iPhone and iCloud, technologies that are the "result of American technological prowess" and that are now being used in the "fight back against a rival nation's efforts to steal technology."[26] Bhattarcharjee takes pains to note the irony of the Chinese spy's capture: the Chinese government's relentless pursuit of high-tech aviation technology, all undone by a Chinese spy's reliance upon his Apple products. There is a dichotomy at work in this article and others like it, on the one hand, portraying the Chinese as incapable of creating technological innovations and, at the same time, preternaturally skilled when it comes to stealing and copying from their US counterparts.

What this and similar stories point to is the fact that techno-Orientalism is a contranym, a word that has two meanings, each of which contradicts the other. This contradictory quality has long been a central aspect of Asian racialization in North America, even prior to the advent of techno-Orientalism. As Colleen Lye writes in *America's Asia*, her influential study of Asian racialization in the twentieth century, discourses surrounding the "yellow peril" and the "model minority" have historically been thought to be in opposition to each other, with the latter

overtaking the former in the late 1960s as a way of understanding Asian immigration to the United States. But Lye argues that rather than conceiving of the yellow peril and model minority narratives as oppositional approaches to Asian raciality, they are "best understood as two aspects of the same, long-running racial form, a form whose most salient feature is the trope of economic efficiency."[27] It is the supposed economic efficiency of the Asian figure that has served as the basis for arguments for exclusion (Asians should be excluded because they threaten American labor, willing to work harder for less pay) *and* assimilation (Asians should be included because they are compliant laborers, willing to work harder for less pay). Based on this logic, the stereotype of the hard-working, economically efficient Asian figure, which is often pegged as emerging during the 1960s as a response to Black civil rights struggles, actually begins to appear much earlier, in the late nineteenth century. Asian racialization is therefore less the result of a racially triangulated relationship with whiteness and Blackness, and more heavily informed by its relationship to capital, labor, and tropes of economic productivity.

Iyko Day further explores the role of Asian bodies in systems of capital and finance in her work *Alien Capital*, arguing that the racialization of the Asian North American figure is tied to settler-colonial logics regarding labor and its relationship to value. Citing critic Neil Levi's work on anti-Semitism, Day argues, "Asians give shape to the abstract circuits of capitalism that have 'no concrete manifestation, that are quite literally *unrepresentable*.'"[28] Day's purpose is to uncover the settler colonial roots of the historical racialization of Asian North American figures in relation to labor and capital, highlighting how the figure of the Asian only comes into being via the violence of capitalist abstraction. But for my purposes, I am particularly interested in Day's theorization of how the abstraction of race—rather than the production of racial difference—makes possible the homogenization of labor into things that are commensurable and have value. In Day's telling, Asian racialization is premised on the notion that the labor of the Asian worker is abstract, versus the concrete, artisanal labor of the white worker.

The laboring Asian subject embodies "abstract processes of value formation," an equivalence that has shifted over the course of the past 150 years, "denigrated as 'cheap' labor" at the end of the nineteenth century before being "valued as 'efficient' in the twenty-first."[29]

K-pop's circulation in the US exemplifies Day's point regarding the relationship between Asian labor, abstraction, and value. Lye argues that Asian racialization in the US is characterized by an "unusual capacity for economic modernity,"[30] but Day's theory enables us to see how the awe expressed over the synchronicity, precision, or efficiency of BTS's embodied performance dovetails with the charge that their work is inorganic, devoid of the distinctiveness or individuality associated with creative labor. A 2018 *New Yorker* article that attempts to explain BTS's popularity to its readership is a case in point. After describing the performers as asexual and incapable of ad-libbing, the writer Amanda Petrusich notes that the "choreography alone is a thing to behold."[31] Admiration for BTS's artistry is immediately undercut by the Petrusich's observation that it is nevertheless "disconcerting to see [such] studied determination applied" to dancing. Petrusich characterizes BTS's music as devoid of carnality or political messaging, omissions that she notes are "fairly staggering in a Western pop context."[32] The article ends with another homage to the "incredible way they [BTS] move."[33] The implication here is clear: Western pop is filled with expressions of sex (which is privileged as a form of individual autonomy) and a resistant politics that challenges listeners to question systems of power. Despite the Orientalist emphasis on "the incredibly way they move," BTS's music, choreography, and fans are disassociated from the bodies of the members and divorced from any notion of the kind of labor that is valued in a settler racial economy. In other words, BTS's labor can be seen and even appreciated, but it has no inherent value.

Similarly, in a seemingly positive article for *Vulture* magazine titled "A Deeper Look at Why BTS Has Thrived in America," also published in 2018, Jakob Dorof begins

by dismissing the notion that there is a "K-pop formula," before spending the rest of the article trying to "crack the group's unique code" in order to understand "*why* BTS is the one K-pop act to have inspired such a following."[34] The invocation of formulas or codes squarely situates BTS's emergence and success within the realm of the hyper-technological. Again, their bodies and labor are rendered in abstractly formulaic terms. Later, Dorof lays BTS's success at the feet of Bang Si-hyuk (known as Hitman Bang), founder of Big Hit Music (rebranded as HYBE in 2021), whose "single and most important stroke of genius may well have been recognizing . . . that America's diehard K-pop fan base had become a big enough demographic to prioritize when creating marketing and content."[35] Dorof also characterizes Bang as a "savant" who "observ[ed] Western K-pop fans and what [made] them tick." Bang's status as a "savant" lies not in his artistic vision or talent in nurturing musical talent but rather in his ability to quantify the demographics of American consumers. Day's theory of Asian labor manifests itself in Dorof's narrative of the group's rise: BTS "give[s] human shape to the abstract circuits of capitalism."[36]

This characterization can also be extended to ARMY, who as I noted at the beginning of this article are often written about with equal amounts of awe, confusion, and contempt. The US media first noted ARMY's fandom when BTS won the fan-voted Top Social Artist at the 2017 Billboard Music Awards, beating out far more famous singers such as Justin Bieber, Ariana Grande, Shawn Mendes, and Selena Gomez. ARMY's ability to mobilize was on display when the fanbase organized an online campaign (#MatchAMillion) to match BTS's donation of $1 million to the Black Lives Matter movement and met that goal in little more than 24 hours.[37] The *New York Times* called ARMY the "secret weapon" behind the $4 billion initial public offering of Big Hit Entertainment, responsible for producing a "fire house" of BTS content and "obsess[ing] [over] metrics."[38] Pointing to accounts like @btsanalytics, which "pumps out bone-dry data on album sales, YouTube views and streaming numbers," the *Times* notes that what makes Big Hit and BTS attractive is not their music, but the "huge and highly

connected ecosystem of fans . . . with a deep, even life-changing attachment to the group and its message of inclusivity and self-love."[39] BTS's success then is reduced to and enhanced by the ability of ARMY to absorb reams of "bone-dry data" *and at the same time*, emotionally—perhaps even hysterically—connect with the group's "message" of "self-love."

I will address the ways that BTS and ARMY rewrites this techno-Orientalist narrative later in this article, but for now, it's important to note that ARMY's multiracial and multinational makeup does not seem to impact the racializing discourses surrounding their labor and their relationship to technology. Andrea Acosta notes that K-pop fans often "fail" "online tests of human verification," because of what is perceived to be automated behavior: "a song looped on Spotify too many times, a track purchased and then re-purchased on the same music site, a YouTube video watched too repetitively and without enough variation."[40] Acosta argues that K-pop fans have to a certain extent embraced the power of their "bothood," a move that frames the bot as a "potentially powerful figure," "an effective, flexible strategy for digital movement and grassroots organization online."[41] Kimery Lynch has argued that the relationship between BTS and ARMY is not "top-down" in its orientation but rather "rhizomatic," a structure that enables online communities "to organically create the strong ties between people required for the formation of networked publics."[42] The racialization of K-pop fans as "bots" who are unthinking in their devotion and at the same time disciplined in their repetitive behaviors suggests the way that Asian figurations can be detached from Asian figures. The fans—most of them non-Asian—who devote themselves to BTS in particular and K-pop more broadly thus emblematize Kandice Chuh's long-standing argument that the proper subject of Asian American inquiry is not and should not be an Asian American body or subject but rather the systems that produce knowledge, aesthetics, and labor—the very "practices of subjectivity" that are enacted by epistemologies of difference.[43]

Techno-Orientalizing the “K” in K-pop

Iyko Day’s theory regarding the abstraction of Asian labor is key to understanding the specific form of techno-Orientalism that is applied to K-pop broadly and BTS in particular. It also requires us to think more seriously about a techno-Orientalist discourse within a US-Korean context. Roh, Huang, and Niu argue that one of the most salient features of techno-Orientalism is its “robust flexibility,” which “allows for seamless transportation to another national site.”[44] According to Roh et al, techno-Orientalism’s transposability explains why even though the concept was first theorized in an era that saw the rise of Japan as an economic rival to the United States, it has since the 1990s frequently (although not universally) been associated with an economically ascendent China.[45] Despite the seeming panethnic sweep of techno-Orientalist discourse, it is nevertheless important to consider it as a formation rooted in particular histories and geopolitical narratives. In his discussion of the transformation of cyberpunk throughout the late twentieth century, Christopher T. Fan explains how the rise of a “techno-Orientalism with Chinese characteristics” in the 1990s stemmed from “US perceptions of China’s post-socialist rise and the beginnings of the two countries’ interdependency.”[46] Fan argues that Chinese techno-Orientalist discourse points to a “critical realism of US-China” relations that reflects American Orientalism’s “non-antinomic formations.”[47] Whereas the techno-Orientalism that emerged out of US–Japan relations is based on an antinomic/yellow peril discourse, Fan suggests that other, “emergent,” and “historically variable” articulations of techno-Orientalism are important to consider.[48] For Fan, contemporary science fiction is the ideal vehicle for “studying transformations in American Orientalism” because “in no other genre has Orientalism become such an aesthetic dominant.”[49]

I would suggest that K-pop offers another venue for considering alternative forms of techno-Orientalism, and that K-pop, like science fiction, offers a rich ground for thinking about the historical shifts in US Orientalism, not only because of its

embodied aesthetics but also because the genre emerged out of a relationship between the US and Korea that has been defined by military interventions and cultural imperialism. Unlike Japan or China, Korea has traditionally not been viewed as an economic or military competitor of the US. Geographically and demographically, Korea is not nearly as large as China, and it does not have a history of imperial or overseas ambition as Japan does. Historically, "developing" nations in Asia, such as South Korea, have often been represented as looking to the United States as a model for modernity, political organization, and technological progress; such a relationship is taken as a given. In an article about the pervasiveness of Chinese espionage, Gideon Lewis-Kraus writes without irony about the tendency for "developing nations [to find] a way to free-ride on the novelties of their more advanced peers."[50] Lewis-Kraus adds that "scholars of international relations call this the 'advantage of backwardness," before noting that such an advantage has not always been considered a "bad thing" from the perspective of the developed nations.[51]

This Orientalist notion that "developing nations" benefit from "free-riding" (in other words, stealing) from more developed benefactor nations is also applied to Korea. US attitudes towards Korea have been informed by Korea's status as a Japanese colony during the early twentieth century as well as the opinions of policy and military figures who, in the years during and after the Korean War, viewed "Korea as politically immature, culturally backward, and prone to dictatorship."[52] Bruce Cumings points out that US "contempt for Korea" fully formed during the Korean War, when the country was at "its modern nadir . . . yet this is where most of the millions of Americans who served in Korea got their impressions."[53] US government policy portrayed Koreans as "acted upon," "passive," and "hopelessly factional."[54] By downplaying the roles of Koreans themselves in post–Korean War history and promulgating a view of Korean backwardness, the US government has provided a justification for its military, governmental, and economic interventions on the peninsula for the past several decades.

Lewis-Kraus's characterization of developing countries as simultaneously "backward" and acquisitive speaks to the paradox at the heart of techno-Orientalism, namely that techno-Orientalism represents an antipodal relationship between the Orient and technology: Asians are technologically advanced, Asians are technologically incompetent. As I noted earlier, most scholarship on techno-Orientalism has focused on its hyper-technological manifestations in Asiatic racial formation; indeed, techno-Orientalist discourse directed toward Japan and China has traditionally focused on the hyper-technological attributes of those countries. I would suggest that American techno-Orientalist responses towards K-pop and BTS are deeply informed by the contradiction that techno-Orientalism names. Techno-Orientalism enables K-pop to be dismissed because of a history that positions Korea as primitive in comparison to the United States, and at the same time, techno-Orientalism enables K-pop to be contained because of the perceived qualities that make it a threat to the United States.

These techno-Orientalist narratives of K-pop—that K-pop reflects the hypo-technological primitiveness of South Korea vis-à-vis the United States and that K-pop reflects the hyper-technological and abstracted labor of Korean performers—are contiguous with each other. Techno-Orientalist discourse as it pertains to K-pop and BTS is most frequently and visibly characterized by an emphasis on the mechanistic, synchronous, and surface-oriented aspects of BTS as performers. In an interview, *Late Late Show* host James Corden, who has had BTS on his show several times, called BTS "organic and unique" before pivoting immediately to the following statement: "It never feels like they're in the machine. They are the machine."[55] When asked by an audience member of *The Daily Show* what it was like to meet BTS, Trevor Noah, who had met the group when hosting the Grammy's in 2022, responded in complimentary terms about the group's friendliness as well as the joy he felt in being with them. He then added: "And they're so good and efficient at what they do. Like, they hit their marks, they're learning their moves . . . But like, really precise, you know?"[56] An *Entertainment Weekly* cover story about the band marveled at the "disconcertingly pretty"

appearance of the members, labelling them the “avatars of [the] poreless,” and “real life Snapchat filters.”[57]

However, this view of BTS’s hyper-technological efficiency is contiguous with a narrative of Korean hypo-technology in relation to the West. This doubling can be seen in much of what is produced about Korean popular culture, sometimes in the same article, sometimes in the span of a few sentences. Then-President Trump blasted *Parasite* after it won the Academy Award for Best Picture of 2019 by arguing that it in no way measured up against past winners, “classic” Hollywood films like *Gone With the Wind* (1939) and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950).[58] In the same breath, he noted ominously that “We’ve got enough problems with South Korea, with trade. On top of it, they give them the best movie of the year?”[59] The crudeness of Trump’s rhetoric notwithstanding, his remarks reflect the antipodal quality of techno-Orientalist discourse as it relates to Korea. Dorof, in his article on BTS’s rise, reproduces that logic, defining K-pop as a cruder, less evolved form of western pop that BTS had to leave behind in order to achieve global fame. He writes that the release of the EP *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life, Part 1*, marked a change for the group as it abandoned the “dated charm” of K-pop production and embraced a “contemporary” sound that combined “lambent synths and lush reverb, [while] incorporating shades of novel subgenres like cloud rap and future bass.”[60] Even as he dismisses the Korean influences on BTS’s music for being antiquated and premodern, Dorof ascribes BTS’s growing stardom to their study and embrace of the more complex musicality of Western electronic genres. It is precisely these types of electronic features, however, that Dorof will cite later in the article as evidence of BTS’s “niche” appeal.

Indeed, it is South Korea’s supposed position as America’s junior partner in Cold War histories that informs the other notable reaction to K-pop’s rise: a strong unwillingness to believe or accept that anything so popular or dominant could emerge out of a country like Korea. In the conclusion to the article that I cited above, Dorof insinuates that sales of the group’s newly released smash album

Love Yourself: Tear as well as the tickets for its sold-out North American concert tour are "bogus." The story of BTS is "the story of . . . how seven young men managed to reach No. 1 on Billboard on the strength of what is essentially the largest, most enthusiastic niche audience in the country."[61] In a *The New Yorker* video that attempts to explain K-pop's popularity, Jeff Rabhan, then music executive and chair of the Clive Davis institute of Recorded Music at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, poses the question—"Is K-pop *the* thing?"—before answering, "Nowhere close."[62] Rabhan goes on to declare that "without question, BTS or larger K-pop groups are going to be able to sell tickets in New York City and certainly sell out Madison Square Garden and do well probably in the top Korean American markets in the US, but beyond that they can't."[63] Rabham's comment is inflected with a certain kind of coastal elitism that depends on certain notions of race, class, and culture but what is key for the purposes of my argument is his belief that K-pop can only appeal to those of Korean descent. His assumption that BTS's popularity can be explained by a certain ethnic tribalism relies upon a notion that Korean popular culture cannot appeal globally.

Dorof anad Rabham's responses to BTS's emergence resound with Euny Hong's experience surrounding the publication of her book, *The Birth of Korean Cool: How One Nation Is Conquering the World through Pop Culture*.[64] Hong's work—part memoir, part cultural history—rehearses an argument that has been debated in several scholarly works on K-pop: namely, the role of the Korean government in the late 1990s and early 2000s in marketing and exporting Korean cultural productions to Asia and then the West. John Lie argues that up until the late 1990s, the music industry in Korea had been "resolutely domestic in orientation and consumption."[65] The financial crisis of 1997 and the intervention of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) fundamentally shifted that focus. K-pop scholar Crystal Anderson notes that that the Korean government began supporting popular Korean music, television, and film in the wake of the IMF crisis as a way of "generat[ing] profits in a global market and spread[ing] Korean

cultural values globally."[66] This is echoed by Lie, who asserts that the IMF crisis "underscored the urgency of cultivating new audiences and new markets."[67] Suk-Young Kim acknowledges the "Korean government's persistent series of campaigns to advance its cultural influence" but argues that the flows of popular culture cannot be satisfactorily explained by an excavation of governmental policies alone.[68] While scholars and critics have gone back and forth on the extent of the Korean government's influence on Hallyu, the general consensus seems to be that government subsidies and directives enabled Korean producers to create shows, music, and films with an eye for foreign markets.

This scholarly conversation that seeks to explain the historical and geopolitical circumstances that lead to the rise of Hallyu has been simplified in US mainstream culture into the notion that the Korean government was and continues to be directly involved in creating and driving the dissemination of Korean culture, particularly K-pop. Hong's gloss of these facts in her manuscript *The Birth of Korean Cool* leads to a rejection by one editor on the grounds that,

the "Gangnam Style" video . . . didn't really get a billion views. The Korean government had hired 10,000 people to click on the video 100,000 times, he insisted. Like many other people I have encountered, he recoiled at the idea that a tiny, formerly destitute Asian country could have pulled off a global cultural coup without some kind of shenanigans.[69]

The editor's disbelief that anything notable could emerge from a country like Korea plays into familiar nationalist narratives that see the US as the producer of both culture and commerce. But what is noteworthy here is the specific insistence that the Korean government "hired 10,000 people to click on the video 100,000 times." Although their assessments of Korean popular culture seem to be diametrically opposed, what Dorof, Rabham, and this unnamed book editor share is the firm belief that K-pop's popularity is being driven by a mechanized and automated process, overseen by master marketeers like Hitman Bang or the

omnipresent Korean government. Underlying both of these assumptions is a belief that "tiny, formerly destitute" countries like Korea are incapable of creating—let alone participating in—cultural products that appeal globally and that therefore shadowy governmental entities/substitutes must be deliberately manipulating platforms like YouTube to drive those numbers. In other words, the seeming omnipresence of K-pop has somehow been manufactured, whether by the Korean government or a fanatical group of "niche" fans whose devotion to BTS (in particular) drives this type of robotic and repetitive behavior. K-pop and BTS's popularity is not the result of their musical, lyrical, or choreographic innovations, but rather purely the result of an automated process in which individuals, because they are paid to or because they are brainwashed, robotically click on links hundreds of thousands of times with the goal of driving up view counts, purchasing singles, or filling up stadiums.

The insistence that BTS produces music for "niche" audiences and is supported by bot armies constructs K-pop music and performance as a token of exchange for votes on social media and purchases on streaming sites and apps. To restate Day's theorization of the abstraction of Asian labor, BTS's recording, production, and performance of their music "becomes progressively abstract, moving from concrete reality to the spectral domain of capital."[70] In other words, the discourse around K-pop broadly and BTS in particular positions them not as artists or musicians but rather attractive vehicles for the manufacture, production, and dissemination of a product that can be bundled with music, books, glow sticks, and other merchandise.

BTS and ARMY: The Empire Hwaits Back

While the band has generally not responded to criticisms regarding the legitimacy of their popularity, RM briefly addressed the controversy in a 2021 cover story for

Billboard magazine, suggesting that the group is an "easy target" because they are a K-pop act with "high fan loyalty."[71] RM's comment not only obliquely references the racism that the band has faced but also pushes back on techno-Orientalist narratives that insist on chart manipulation. I argue that his comment speaks to the ways that the group—and its fans—reject narratives that portray K-pop as a form of abstract labor, accomplished only for its automaticity and mechanical difficulty. "Hwaiting"—taken from the English word "fighting"—is a Korean term that expresses support or encouragement, a term that captures the extent to which BTS's success globally is as much a result of their *resistance* to techno-Orientalist narratives as it is an enactment of those narratives. In the many videos that the group publishes on their social media, the very materials that critics often identify as part of the BTS "machine," BTS members reject portrayals of their music or their performances as hyper-technological, modern, or seamlessly synchronic; quite the contrary. If the work of settler capital is to construct Asian labor as abstract and therefore antinomical to the romanticized concrete labor that is valued and valuable, then BTS's insistence on revealing the "thingly"-ness of their work—the endless dance practices, the grueling concert schedule, the long hours in the hair and make-up chair—seems to be a refutation of that form of anti-Asian racialization.

This emphasis on the physical and emotional labor that goes into the performance process is perhaps most visible in the dozens of dance practice videos that the band has recorded over the years. Dance practice videos are standard in the K-pop industry and in their earliest incarnations consisted of unedited footage of K-pop groups dancing to the choreography of a song in a rehearsal space.[72] Until recently,[73] BTS's dance practice videos were characterized by their relatively raw production value: a single, fixed camera records the members as they dance, dressed in sweats, without hair or make-up. Before HYBE moved its headquarters into a gleaming new building in 2021, BTS's practice videos were generally filmed in a cramped dance studio with equipment sometimes visible in the background. The practice rooms were lit with the kind of fluorescent track lighting that one

finds in hospitals or office buildings. During the practice, the song track played over the room's sound system, and the members, although they sometimes mouth along to the lyrics, made no pretense that they were singing live. The mic often picked up the squeaking of the members' sneakers on the wooden floor (although they were occasionally barefoot) and their heavy breathing as they executed the steps. In a dance practice for "IDOL" (which is frequently identified by the members as one of the most difficult choreographies to perform), the members were visibly and audibly fatigued by the time the song is over—you could hear them panting as they sank to the floor. The practice videos emphasize the somatic and corporeal qualities of each member, making visible or audible each intake of breath, each leap off the ground, each movement of the body. In other words, BTS's dance practice videos effectively affirm the members are not "technologically infused persons" but rather embodied, *organic* humans who breathe, sweat, and move.[74]

The "IDOL" dance practice also highlights another way that I argue BTS contravenes narratives of Asian racialization: by drawing attention to the fact that the members *make mistakes*. Note that this is not part of a yellow peril narrative that insists on the fragility of the Asian body—quite the contrary. The failure here has to do with BTS's insistence—often humorous, always gentle—on the fallibility of their bodies and the variability of human performance in any context. On the surface, this doesn't seem all that remarkable, but if techno-Orientalism works to abstract BTS from the concreteness of their own labor then I would argue that one of the ways that members have attempted to thwart the naturalness of that association is by emphasizing the embodied qualities of their lives as musicians and performers, particularly when those bodies do not move as planned. To put it another way, if the racializing discourses surrounding K-pop rely upon the notion of Asian labor as an abstraction that is reproducible, in which "mistakes and ad-libs are unthinkable,"[75] as *The New Yorker* argues and almost every popular story about the group echoes, then BTS and ARMY's insistence on the members'

missteps, shortcomings, and blunders provides a powerful rebuttal to that broader cultural narrative.

Even though they are not the focus of most news stories about the group, examples of BTS's mistakes abound. Over the years, Jin, the oldest member, has made a running joke out of the difficulty of the group's choreography, talking openly about the fact that he needs extra time to learn the moves compared to the other members. During the comeback special for *Map of the Soul: 7* (which was released during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020), RM asks Jin a question about the difficulty of the choreography for the album. Jin begins his response seriously, noting "I'm not as good at learning the moves compared to others."[76] As the other members vigorously counter this assertion ("Don't say such a thing," and "We know the best since we're there"), Jin insists, "It's possible that my abilities are less than yours." As the other members continue to defend his abilities as a dancer, Jin ironically orders them not to raise their voices to him, causing the entire group to dissolve in laughter. The members also constantly joke about the fear they feel if they make a choreography mistake in front of J-Hope, the group's unofficial dance captain and its most graceful and innovative dancer. The joke is so widely known that it was a part of a game played on BTS's long-running variety web show, *Run BTS*.

Importantly, ARMY seems to delight in the group's errors as much as the individual members do. There is an entire subcategory of BTS fan videos on social media channels like YouTube that compile the group's choreography missteps both in live performances and in music videos. These videos, which have tens of millions of views, frequently refer to the mistakes as "cute" or praise the members for how quickly and gracefully they recover from the error. One of the most thorough of this kind of fan post can be found on a YouTube account called @SugArmyy. In painstaking detail, utilizing graphics and various editing techniques, the owner of this account analyzes a mistake on Jimin's part during the group's live performance of its hit song "Idol" on the morning show *Good*

Morning America in September 2018.[77] We see clips of BTS's own behind-the-scenes video after the performance, in which the members tease Jimin about his mistake. The focus on BTS's mistakes suggests that ARMY's appreciation of the group is based in part on their fallibility, and not so much on their perfection. In other words, the fans enjoy the fact that the choreography is difficult *and* frequently imperfect. This emphasis on variation and asynchronicity, coupled with the pleasure that both BTS and their fans take in narrating and re-narrating these imprecisions, offers a powerful counter to the prevailing narrative of the BTS "machine" or ARMY "bots."

Conclusion: COVID-19 and the Biggest Boy Band in the World

If BTS exemplifies certain strains of Asian racialization as it relates to labor, technology, and histories of imperialism, then how can we read the group's unprecedented mainstream success and national visibility during the pandemic? Although BTS have been global superstars since 2017—with sold-out multinational stadium tours, appearances on American award and television shows, billions in sales and streams, and countless brand partnerships—it wasn't until after COVID-19 hit in the summer of 2020, at the height of pandemic lockdowns when fear of the virus was at its most intense, that the band reached its heights of US fame. Their ascent started with the release of the single "Dynamite," their first #1 on the Billboard Hot 100. In early October, the group hit #1 again with "Savage Love (Laxed—Siren Beat)," a remix with Jawsh 685 and Jason Derulo. Nearly two months after that, "Life Goes On," the title track of their fifth studio album *BE*, became the group's third #1 on the Billboard Hot 100 and the first song primarily sung in Korean to occupy the top slot. 2021 brought three more #1 hits with "Butter," "Permission to Dance," and "My Universe," a

collaboration with British band Coldplay, as well as the Artist of the Year honors at the American Music Awards, the first Asian musicians to win that title.

Four days after the release of "Dynamite," on August 25, 2020, COVID-19 became the third-leading cause of death in the United States, with deaths exceeding 1000 per day. Two weeks later, the World Health Organization reported 5.8 million cases of COVID-19 in the United States, a number that represented 25% of the global total.[78] From the earliest days of the public health crisis, then-President Donal Trump frequently referred to the COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" or "Kung flu," with members of his administration and the Republican party following his lead.[79] Researchers found that Trump's first documented use of the phrase "Chinese virus," in a tweet posted on March 16, 2020, led to a proliferation of anti-Asian speech on Twitter.[80] As COVID-19 spread, Asians living in the United States experienced a surge in racially motivated crimes and violence.[81] Between 2000 and 2021, more than 9000 incidents of anti-Asian violence were logged on a website run by Stop AAPI Hate. In a survey taken in April 2021, one-third of Asian adults (32%) said they personally knew an Asian person in the US who has been threatened or attacked because of their race.[82]

While it's easy to ascribe BTS's US chart success during COVID-19 to their decision to sing in English, I want to conclude this article by asking what it means that a Korean pop group catapulted to the top of the charts and the heart of mainstream US popular culture at the very moment that the nation was also leveling a wave of rhetorical and physical violence at Asian Americans and Asian diasporans for supposedly creating and then spreading a deadly virus that has been widely racialized as Chinese. How can we unpack the seeming contradiction of BTS's popularity at this historical juncture?

As I've argued throughout this article, that contradiction isn't really a contradiction but rather a function of the way that Asians are racialized in the United States. In the case of the pandemic: one version of COVID-19's origins

imagines Chinese scientists in the Wuhan Institute of Virology using advanced biomedical technology to engineer the virus for global dissemination, while another depicts Chinese tradespeople sitting amidst caged animals in a wet market in Wuhan, passively becoming vectors of contagion, their bodies utterly resistant to modern technologies of hygiene, food preparation, and consumption. In one scenario, Asian laborers mechanically produce new viruses in technologically advanced settings; in the other, they cage and prepare animals to be eaten. Both of those stories, although seemingly oppositional in the way they depict China's relationship to technology and the workers who produce it, nevertheless gained a tremendous amount of traction during the early days of the pandemic. The contranymic aspects of techno-Orientalism in particular and Asian racialization more broadly also explain one of the more unexpected forms of anti-Asian violence that emerged out of the pandemic: that of assailants spitting on Asian victims, often while accusing them of being the source of the virus.[83] Spitting has long been used in racist attacks to express contempt, disrespect, or hatred, and that is no different in these recent cases. Within the context of the pandemic, the spitting serves another purpose: to symbolically infect the victim's body with the virus, with the attacker's bodily fluids serving as the vehicle for transmission. Spitting on Asian individuals in this context suggests that the attacker's body contains the very virus that he or she is accusing the victim of creating or transmitting. Even within the realm of racist violence—which operates under its own convoluted logic of hate, anxiety, and fear—using one's own saliva to infect Asian people with the very disease that one is blaming them for spreading is a head-scratcher. Such an act seems impossible to understand, until we recall that Asian racialization depends on an uneven reversal: the virus is an expression of Asian technological modernity and, at the same time and equally true, the virus can easily kill weaker, less developed Asian bodies.

The prolific and mostly fawning coverage of BTS in 2020 does not disrupt or dispel the seemingly contradictory representations of Asians as techno-Orientalist drones or infectious agents. BTS's ascent, in other words, is not a sign

of the nation's desire to live or even envision a more racially just future. If anything, the pandemic has made starkly clear the premise of my argument: that the faultline running through contemporary Asian racial formation oscillates between a series of misalignments or seeming contradictions. Asians embody the highly synthetic and mechanistic (such as BTS) *and* simultaneously are figures of lumpen, infectious, unevolved flesh (in relation to COVID-19).

BTS's emergence as "the most popular band in the world" at a time of increased anti-Asian xenophobia and violence signals the ways in which techno-Orientalist Asiatic racial form combines with long-standing anxieties about Asian bodies as contaminants, or what Quinn Lester describes as "yellow life as antinomy for western life."[84] At the same time that the nation is discursively and physically assaulting Asian bodies for spreading a virus, it expresses awe of Asian bodies' flawless dancing, "smooth vocals," and seemingly "perfectly calibrated" movements.[85] What COVID-19 makes clear is that the seemingly rapturous response to BTS is not a sign of the nation's progressive willingness to embrace Asian diasporic subjects or productions, but rather emblematic of long-running narratives of Asian racial formation. Even the biggest boy band in the world, at the height of its popularity, can't completely escape the pull of histories of Asian racialization.

Notes

1. Tim Breihan, "BTS and Their Fan Army Are Rendering the Pop Charts Useless," *StereoGum*, June 2, 2021, https://www.stereogum.com/2149730/bts-butter-hot-100-billboard-chart/columns/sounding-board < https://www.stereogum.com/2149730/bts-butter-hot-100-billboard-chart/columns/sounding-board/> . ↩
2. Breihan, "BTS and Their Fan Army." ↩
3. Breihan, "BTS and Their Fan Army." ↩
4. Breihan, "BTS and Their Fan Army." ↩
5. Billboard BREAKDOWN, "Billboard Breakdown – Hot 100 – July 3, 2021 (BALL IF I WANT TO, LUMBERJACK, working, Fancy Like)," *YouTube*, June 29, 2021,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14sckHSrwgM < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14sckHSrwgM> .

6. Bryan Rolli, "BTS's Enduring Success Is Forcing People to Rethink the Charts," *Forbes*, July 1, 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanrolli/2021/07/01/btss-enduring-success-is-forcing-people-to-rethink-the-charts/?sh=4930609042b7 < https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanrolli/2021/07/01/btss-enduring-success-is-forcing-people-to-rethink-the-charts/?sh=4930609042b7> .

7. Chris Molanphy, "The Kid Laroi and Justin Bieber Finally Kicked BTS From Billboard's Top Slot," *Slate*, August 19, 2021, https://slate.com/culture/2021/08/kid-laroi-justin-bieber-stay-bts-song-of-summer-2021-billboard.html < https://slate.com/culture/2021/08/kid-laroi-justin-bieber-stay-bts-song-of-summer-2021-billboard.html> , emphasis added.

8. Chris Molanphy, "BTS Are Playing—and Winning—the Billboard Charts Game Fair and Square," *Slate*, June 5, 2021, https://slate.com/culture/2021/06/bts-butter-billboard-hot-100.html < https://slate.com/culture/2021/06/bts-butter-billboard-hot-100.html> .

9. In an article about the band that appeared in *Billboard* magazine, the writer Jeyup S. Kwaak notes that the Hot 100's purpose is "accurately highlighting the world's most popular acts." Jeyup S. Kwaak, "Inside the Business of BTS—and the Challenges Ahead," *Billboard*, August 26, 2021, https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/bts-billboard-cover-story-2021-interview-9618967 < https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/bts-billboard-cover-story-2021-interview-9618967/> .

10. The members have repeatedly spoken of their desire to sing and rap predominantly in Korean; however, neither the band nor its management company have ever been secretive about their global ambitions, manifested most recently in HYBE's $1 billion acquisition of Ithaca Holdings from Scooter Braun.

11. Examples of this type of violence abound. Ridicule of BTS as well as other male K-Pop singers and performers often centers around their presentation of a more androgynous or "softer" masculinity. See Jeehyun Jenny Lee, Rachel Kar Yee Lee, and Ji Hoon Park, "Unpacking K-pop in America: The Subversive Potential of Male K-pop Idols' Soft Masculinity," *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020): 5900–19, https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/13514/3281 < https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/13514/3281> . To name one of the more recent examples, Joe Budden, a former hip-hop artist and current broadcaster who has been called "the Howard Stern of hip-hop," ranted in a widely circulated podcast episode that he didn't want to "hear that shit," meaning BTS's music, nor to "see them dance moves. I don't wanna see you come down from the sky in a little umbrella." While Budden's reference might be read as a typical homophobic trope (assuming that "little umbrellas" is a reference to "fairies" and the wands they carry), he also imagines the members "link{ing} up like Voltron." He ends his diatribe by misstating the band's home country as China. See Gil Kaufman, "Joe Budden under Fire for Saying He 'Hates' BTS, Misstates that They're from China," *Billboard*, April 7, 2022,

https://www.billboard.com/music/rb-hip-hop/joe-budden-hates-bts-missates-from-china-podcast-1235056483 < https://www.billboard.com/music/rb-hip-hop/joe-budden-hates-bts-missates-from-china-podcast-1235056483/> . The combination of hetero-nationalism, homophobia, and misogyny also pervades responses to a social media post by the Los Angeles Dodgers, who noted the presence of BTS member Suga at one of their home games. One social media user wrote: "Americans don't like that crap, except pre teen girls {*sic*}." See Sara Delgado, "The BTS ARMY Called Out People Who Made Racist Comments about a Photo of Suga at a Dodgers Game," *Teen Vogue*, May 10, 2019, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/bts-army-called-out-racist-comments-photo-suga-dodgers-game < https://www.teenvogue.com/story/bts-army-called-out-racist-comments-photo-suga-dodgers-game> . ↩

12. Soo Kim, "James Corden Upsets BTS Fans After Calling ARMY '15-Year-Olds,'" *Newsweek*, September 22, 2021, https://www.newsweek.com/james-corden-backlash-bts-fans-un-general-assembly-new-york-1631419 < https://www.newsweek.com/james-corden-backlash-bts-fans-un-general-assembly-new-york-1631419> . ↩

13. An "ARMY Census" conducted on Twitter by @amidocumentary, @BTS_iTunesZA, @liltove, @ResearchBTS, and @OWOLMovie collected over 562,000 responses between April 1 and May 31, 2022. The vast majority of respondents (over 96%) identified as female. Nearly 70% of respondents were over the age of 18 with 18–29-year-olds making up the largest cohort. In addition, about 44% of respondents resided in Central or Latin America. Viewers located in Japan made up the largest percentage of those watching BTS's YouTube channel, followed by viewers in India and Mexico. For views by country, see Statista Research Department, "Number of Views of K-pop Group BTS Videos on YouTube," August 23, 2024, https://www.statista.com/statistics/973644/south-korea-bts-youtube-channel-views-by-country < https://www.statista.com/statistics/973644/south-korea-bts-youtube-channel-views-by-country> . ↩

14. According to an Asian American Foundation report, 21% of Americans believe that Asian Americans are "partly responsible" for COVID-19. See The Asian American Foundation, "STAATUS (Social Tracking of Asian Americans in the US) Index Report 2022," https://staatus-index.s3.amazonaws.com/STAATUS%20Index%202022%20Report.pdf < https://staatus-index.s3.amazonaws.com/STAATUS%20Index%202022%20Report.pdf> . ↩

15. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism," in *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, ed. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu (Rutgers University Press, 2015), 2. My emphasis. ↩

16. Roh, Huang, and Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism," 14. ↩

17. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1979), 35. ↩

18. Toshiya Ueno, "Techno-Orientalism and Media Tribalism: On Japanese Animation and Rave Culture," *Third Text* 13, no. 47 (1999): 97, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528829908576801 < https://doi.org/10.1080/09528829908576801> .

19. David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (Routledge, 1995), 6.

20. Roh, Huang, and Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism," 7.

21. Roh, Huang, and Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism," 9.

22. Lok Siu and Claire Chun, "Yellow Peril and Techno-Orientalism in the time of Covid-19: Racialized Contagion, Scientific Espionage, and Techno-Economic Warfare," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 23, no. 3 (2020): 425, https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2020.0033 < https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2020.0033> .

23. Siu and Chun, "Yellow Peril," 430.

24. The cases brought against Wen Ho Lee, Chi Mak, Dongfan Chung, Walter Liew, and Wenfeng Lu garnered the most publicity.

25. See news stories related to Charles Lieber, the chair of the chemistry and chemical biology department at Harvard University, or Enrique Lavernia, former provost at the University of California, Irvine.

26. Yudhijit Bhattacharjee, "The Daring Ruse that Exposed China's Campaign to Steal American Secrets," *New York Times*, March 7, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/07/magazine/china-spying-intellectual-property.html < https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/07/magazine/china-spying-intellectual-property.html> .

27. Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893–1945* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

28. Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2016), 8. See also Neil Levi, "'See That Straw? That's a Straw': Anti-Semitism and Narrative Form in *Ulysses*," *Modernism/modernity* 9, no. 3 (2002): 375–88, https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2002.0056 < https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2002.0056> , emphasis in original.

29. Day, *Alien Capital*, 8.

30. Lye, *America's Asia*, 3.

31. Amanda Petrusich, "Two Theories on How K-pop Made it to No. 1 in America," *The New Yorker*, May 29, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/two-theories-on-how-k-pop-made-it-to-no-1-in-america < https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/two-theories-on-how-k-pop-made-it-to-no-1-in-america> .

32. Petrusich, "Two Theories." ↩

33. Petrusich, "Two Theories." ↩

34. Jakob Dorof, "A Deeper Look at Why BTS Has Thrived in America," *Vulture*, June 12, 2018, https://www.vulture.com/2018/06/a-deeper-look-at-why-bts-has-thrived-in-america.html < https://www.vulture.com/2018/06/a-deeper-look-at-why-bts-has-thrived-in-america.html> . ↩

35. Dorok, "A Deeper Look." ↩

36. Day, *Alien Capital*, 8. ↩

37. Aditi Bhandari, Gerry Doyle, and Stephen Coates, "The Mobilizing Power of the BTS Army," *The Financial Post*, July 15, 2020, https://financialpost.com/pmn/business-pmn/the-mobilizing-power-of-the-bts-army < https://financialpost.com/pmn/business-pmn/the-mobilizing-power-of-the-bts-army> . ↩

38. Ben Dooley and Su-Hyun Lee, "BTS's Loyal Army of Fans Is the Secret Weapon Behind a $4 Billion Valuation," *New York Times*, October 14, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/14/business/bts-ipo.html < https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/14/business/bts-ipo.html> . ↩

39. Dooley and Lee, "BTS's Loyal Army." ↩

40. Andrea Acosta, "Bots and Binaries: On the Failure of Human Verification," *Post45*, February 23, 2023, https://post45.org/2023/02/bots-and-binaries-on-the-failure-of-human-verification < https://post45.org/2023/02/bots-and-binaries-on-the-failure-of-human-verification> . ↩

41. Acosta, "Bots and Binaries." ↩

42. Kimery Lynch, "Fan Activists or Activists Who Happen to Be Fans?," *The Rhizomatic Revolution Review*, no. 3 (2021), https://ther3journal.com/issue-3/fan-activists-or-activists-who-happen-to-be-fans < https://ther3journal.com/issue-3/fan-activists-or-activists-who-happen-to-be-fans> . ↩

43. Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Duke University Press, 2003), 10–11. ↩

44. Roh, Huang, and Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism," 11. ↩

45. Roh, Huang, and Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism," 3. ↩

46. Christopher T. Fan, "Techno-Orientalism with Chinese Characteristics: Maureen F. McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang*," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015): 2, https://doi.org/10.5070/T861019585 < https://doi.org/10.5070/T861019585> . ↩

47. Fan, "Techno-Orientalism," 3. ↩

48. Fan, "Techno-Orientalism," 3. ↩

49. Fan, "Techno-Orientalism," 3. ↩

50. Gideon Lewis-Kraus, "Have Chinese Spies Infiltrated American Campuses?," *The New Yorker*, March 14, 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/03/21/have-chinese-spies-infiltrated-american-campuses < https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/03/21/have-chinese-spies-infiltrated-american-campuses> . ↩

51. Lewis-Kraus, "Have Chinese Spies." ↩

52. Charles Kraus, "American Orientalism in Korea," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 22, no. 2 (2015): 150, https://doi.org/10.1163/18765610-02202004 < https://doi.org/10.1163/18765610-02202004> . ↩

53. Bruce Cumings, "American Orientalism at War in Korea and the United States: A Hegemony of Racism, Repression, and Amnesia," in *Orientalism and War*, ed. Tarak Barkawi and Keith Stanski (Columbia University Press, 2013), 46. ↩

54. Adam J. Cathcart, "The War for Korea, 1945–1950: A House Burning (Review)," *Korean Studies* 31 (2007): 95, https://doi.org/10.1353/ks.2008.0005 < https://doi.org/10.1353/ks.2008.0005> . ↩

55. Quoted in Brian Hiatt, "The Triumph of BTS," *Rolling Stone*, May 13, 2021, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/new-bts-song-2021-worlds-biggest-band-1166441 < https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/new-bts-song-2021-worlds-biggest-band-1166441> . ↩

56. The Daily Show, "Trevor on Meeting BTS – Behind the Scenes," *YouTube*, April 13, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9SoMgnVgTo < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9SoMgnVgTo> . ↩

57. Leah Greenblatt, "The Greatest Showmen," *Entertainment Weekly*, March 28, 2019, https://ew.com/music/2019/03/28/bts-exclusive-cover-story < https://ew.com/music/2019/03/28/bts-exclusive-cover-story> . ↩

58. *All the King's Men*, not *Sunset Boulevard*, won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1950. ↩

59. Michael Levenson, "Trump Denounces Oscar Winner 'Parasite,'" *New York Times*, February 20, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/us/trump-parasite-academy-oscar-south-korean.html < https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/us/trump-parasite-academy-oscar-south-korean.html> . ↩

60. Dorof, "A Deeper Look." ↩

61. Dorof, "A Deeper Look." ↩

62. *The New Yorker*, "Experts Explain How K-Pop Exploded in America | Expert Perspectives | The New Yorker," *YouTube*, December 8, 2020,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCOGl9p08rg < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCOGl9p08rg> .

63. *The New Yorker*, "Experts Explain." Here I note the factual inaccuracy of Rabhan's statement, which erroneously presumes that those of Korean descent are driving BTS's concert sales. BTS sold out MetLife Stadium—as well as nine other stadium venues on four continents—in 2019 during the *Speak Yourself* tour, making BTS the top-grossing tour of that year ahead of US-based groups like Metallica and the Rolling Stones. See Tamar Herman, "BTS Sell Out 'Love Yourself: Speak Yourself' Stadium Dates in England, France & U.S.," *Billboard*, March 1, 2019, https://www.billboard.com/pro/bts-sell-out-love-yourself-speak-yourself-tour-dates < https://www.billboard.com/pro/bts-sell-out-love-yourself-speak-yourself-tour-dates/> ; and Bryan Rolli, "BTS Were the Top-Grossing Touring Group of 2019," *Forbes*, December 6, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanrolli/2019/12/06/bts-were-the-top-grossing-touring-group-of-2019 < https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanrolli/2019/12/06/bts-were-the-top-grossing-touring-group-of-2019/> . The *Map of the Soul* tour, which was scheduled to kick off in Asia in February of 2020, sold out 39 stadium shows in 18 countries before being canceled due the pandemic. See Anika Choudhary, "BTS 'Map of the Soul' Tour Cancelled," *The Californian*, October 15, 2021, https://www.thecalifornianpaper.com/2021/10/bts-map-of-the-soul-tour-cancelled < https://www.thecalifornianpaper.com/2021/10/bts-map-of-the-soul-tour-cancelled> .

64. Euny Hong, *The Birth of Korean Cool: How One Nation Is Conquering the World through Pop Culture* (Picador, 2014).

65. John Lie, "What Is the K in K-pop? South Korean Popular Music, the Culture Industry, and National Identity," *Korean Observer* 43, no. 3 (2012): 351. Available at: http://koreaobserver.or.kr/html.

66. Crystal S. Anderson, "Global South Korea and the K-Pop Phenomenon," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, August 2018, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.770 < https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.770> .

67. John Lie, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea* (University of California Press, 2014), 117.

68. Suk Young Kim, *K-Pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance* (Stanford University Press, 2018), 26.

69. Euny Hong, "I May Have Started a Rumor about K-Pop, and It May Be Ruining My Life," *New York Times*, January 3, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/03/opinion/bts-k-pop-conspiracy.html < https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/03/opinion/bts-k-pop-conspiracy.html> .

70. Day, *Alien Capital*, 44.

71. Jeyup S. Kwaak, "The Bet on BTS," *Billboard Magazine*, August 8, 2021, 45.

72. These types of videos were popularized by the K-Pop band SHINee, who released the first dance practice video for their hit single "Replay" in 2008. ↩

73. In the past several years, the look of these videos has changed considerably. Production values for the videos have improved dramatically with sleeker backgrounds and a more polished aesthetic. While the practice room venue and single camera set-up remains relatively unchanged, the camera now frequently moves with the performers so as to better capture the choreography. The performers, although still casually dressed, have clearly had hair and make-up done. ↩

74. Roh, Huang, and Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism," 12. ↩

75. Petrusich, "Two Theories." ↩

76. BTS, "BTS Comeback Special: Let's Do a Viewable 'Purple' Radio," Weverse, February 21, 2020, https://weverse.io/bts/live/3-104695826 < https://weverse.io/bts/live/3-104695826> . The exchange begins at the 9:04 mark. ↩

77. SugArmyy, "Jimin's Mistake Makes Suga Confused, But Hobi Lets It Slide Bcs Its Jimin | Suga Thinks Its {*sic*} Unfair," *YouTube*, April 3, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZImIWAe6Q0 < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZImIWAe6Q0> . ↩

78. World Health Organization, "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Weekly Epidemiological Update," August 31, 2020, https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200831-weekly-epi-update-3.pdf < https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200831-weekly-epi-update-3.pdf> . ↩

79. Both Mike Pompeo, then-secretary of state in the Trump administration, and Kevin McCarthy, then-House minority leader, publicly referred to COVID-19 as the "Wuhan coronavirus." Other Republican officials, including Senator Tom Cotton, and Representative Paul Gosar have done the same. See Kimmy Yam, "Trump Tweets about Coronavirus Using Term 'Chinese Virus," *NBC News*, March 16, 2020, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/trump-tweets-about-coronavirus-using-term-chinese-virus-n1161161 < https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/trump-tweets-about-coronavirus-using-term-chinese-virus-n1161161> ; and Katie Rogers, "Politicians' Use of 'Wuhan Virus' Starts a Debate Health Experts Want to Avoid," *New York Times*, March 10, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/us/politics/wuhan-virus.html < https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/us/politics/wuhan-virus.html> . ↩

80. Yulin Hswen, Xiang Xu, Anna Hing, Jared B. Hawkins, John S. Brownstein, and Gilbert C. Gee, "Association of '#covid19' Versus '#chinesevirus' With Anti-Asian Sentiments on Twitter: March 9–23, 2020," *American Journal of Public Health* 111, no. 5 (2021): 960, https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2021.306154 < https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2021.306154> . ↩

81. The US Commission on Civil Rights released a report in 2023 stating that anti-Asian hate crimes had increased by 150% between 2019 and 2020. See "The Federal Response to Anti-Asian Racism in the United States," September 27, 2023,

https://www.usccr.gov/files/2023-09/fy-2023-se-report_0.pdf < https://www.usccr.gov/files/2023-09/fy-2023-se-report_0.pdf> .

82. Neil G. Ruiz, Carolyne Im, and Ziyao Tian, "Discrimination Experiences Shape Most Asian Americans' Lives" (Pew Research Center, November 2023), https://www.pewresearch.org/2023/11/30/asian-americans-and-discrimination-during-the-covid-19-pandemic < https://www.pewresearch.org/2023/11/30/asian-americans-and-discrimination-during-the-covid-19-pandemic> .

83. Siemny Kim, "Woman, Spat On Last May in SPD's First Reported Anti-Asian Pandemic-Related Crime, Speaks Out," *KIRO7*, April 6, 2021, "https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/woman-spat-last-may-spds-first-reported-anti-asian-pandemic-related-crime-speaks-out/IDH7XJZYVFGJDA5KSYITJ7LQIM < https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/woman-spat-last-may-spds-first-reported-anti-asian-pandemic-related-crime-speaks-out/IDH7XJZYVFGJDA5KSYITJ7LQIM/> ; "Coronavirus Xenophobia: Asian-Americans Attacked, Spit On and Blamed for Outbreak," *ABC7 Eyewitness News*, March 31, 2020, https://abc7.com/coronavirus-discrimination-stewart-kwoh-founder-of-asian-americans-advancing-justice-skype/6063621 < https://abc7.com/coronavirus-discrimination-stewart-kwoh-founder-of-asian-americans-advancing-justice-skype/6063621/> ; and Matt Loffman, "Asian Americans Describe 'Gut Punch' of Racist Attacks During Coronavirus Pandemic," *PBS News*, April 7, 2020, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/asian-americans-describe-gut-punch-of-racist-attacks-during-coronavirus-pandemic < https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/asian-americans-describe-gut-punch-of-racist-attacks-during-coronavirus-pandemic> .

84. Quinn Lester, "Bio-Orientalism and the Yellow Peril of Yellow Life," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 7, no. 1 (2021): 3, https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v7i1.34382 < https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v7i1.34382> .

85. Kwaak, "The Bet," 43.

Author Information

Julia H. Lee

Julia H. Lee is professor and chair of Asian American Studies at the University of California, Irvine. She is the author of *Interracial Encounters: Reciprocal Representations in African and Asian American Literatures, 1896–1937* (New York University Press, 2011), *Understanding Maxine Hong Kingston* (University of South Carolina Press, 2018), and *The Racial Railroad* (New York University Press,

2022). She is co-editor of *Asian American Literature in Transition, 1850–1930* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), which was a Choice Outstanding Academic Title for 2022.

View all of Julia H. Lee's articles.

Article details

Julia H. Lee, "BTS and the Labor of Techno-Orientalism," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.5

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Introduction – Performance and Political Economy: Bodies, Politics, and Well-Being

by Katerina Paramana | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024), Political Economy and the Arts

ABSTRACT In this article, Katerina Paramana introduces *Lateral*'s special section, "Political Economy and the Arts," and its first set of articles, "Performance and Political Economy: Bodies, Politics, and Well-Being," and provides the rationale and context for this section's topic. In the face of a multiplicity of world-wide problems and suffering, this special section aims at a reinvestment in desire for change in order to resuscitate and reinvest in hope. The articles therein provide insights into the current relationship between politics, human and non-human bodies, and their well-being (and why it is necessary we take action to change it) which might help us steer the wheel before we drive off the cliff.

KEYWORDS bodies, performance, political economy, politics, well-being

Lateral's special section "Political Economy and the Arts" seeks to address how art and political economy might impact, critique, and reflect on one another and their futurity through the staging of conversations across the fields of visual and performing arts, cultural studies, visual cultures, politics, economics, human geography, social theory, and health and well-being. It invites the submission of articles, manifestos, provocations, interviews, dialogical exchanges, and artist contributions that aim to, for example:[1]

- Examine labor, work, productivity, or the growth economic paradigm and their relation to bodies/well-being/artistic practices.

- Analyze artworks that have made impactful statements about the political economy in which they are embedded and/or offered important insights about reimagining the role of political economy.
- Comparatively examine artworks within different political economies.
- Trace how politico-economic contexts affect artworks or artistic practices.
- Reveal racial capitalism's impact on artistic practices.
- Enter into dialogue with existing publications on art/performance and politics to offer a point of view from a marginalized perspective.
- Offer a textual or audio-visual provocation that invites or necessitates a response from a different disciplinary perspective or from another author.

Although subsequent contributions to the section will be developed from open calls, dialogical exchanges, and provocations, this first iteration of the section emerged from the events of the research seminar series "Performance and Political Economy: Bodies, Politics, and Well-Being in the 21st Century,"[2] which I curated in 2023–2024 as part of my work leading the activities of the Performance, Cultures and Politics Research Group at Brunel University of London.[3] It includes contributions from the events' speakers as well as from others who were invited to enter into dialogue with the research seminar series' three events: "Political Economy and Contemporary Performance Practices," "Bodies and Racial Capitalism," and "The Growth Economic Paradigm, Human and Non-Human Bodies, and Well-Being." In keeping with the focus of the series and of this journal section, the pieces in this current issue examine the relationship between bodies, politics, and well-being by bringing together perspectives from researchers and practitioners from the arts, political economy, and health and well-being. Most of the articles here are developments of the presentations by the speakers at the series' events, following the dialogical exchanges that took place there, while some are new contributions on the topic. In what follows, I offer the rationale for and some context on the topic and introduce the article contributions to it.

It is important to note that bringing together different disciplinary perspectives presupposes and necessitates a variety of approaches to and expanded

understandings of what constitutes performance, well-being, and politics. For example, articles in this issue approach performance as the performance of self, the movement of bodies across borders, or the artform itself, and well-being—both physical and psychological—as being detrimentally affected by factors such as the function of capitalism, ecological devastation, forced migration, and displacement. What the terms performance, bodies, and well-being intend to encompass and the ways they perform is highlighted in the summary of each article in the last section of this introduction. Such different methodological approaches and inter- and trans-disciplinary understandings are embraced by the Political Economy and the Arts special section in general and in this issue; experimentation and exploration of the gaps between disciplines and methodologies are part of its ethos.

Bodies, Politics, and Well-Being

The mechanisms and effects of neoliberal capitalism have been widely discussed.[4] Wendy Brown, for example, building on Foucault's thinking, argues that in neoliberal capitalism all spheres of life are treated as markets and are therefore "economized."[5] David Harvey emphasizes neoliberalism's effects on both the role of the state and of the individual: The state is expected to create and maintain an institutional framework that serves neoliberal practices even though these work against the welfare of the collective of individuals, and the individual is expected to best advance their well-being by freeing individual entrepreneurial skills and freedoms.[6]

However, for Marx, it is capitalism in general that is antithetical to well-being. Marx's conception of ethics as they relate to capitalism and his views on capitalism's effects on human well-being underlie all of his work but are most evident in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* through his perspective on human nature and account of alienation.[7] Capitalism, for Marx, prevents

humans from living life in a manner consistent with their human nature—it alienates them from their human nature because the abstract relations to wage labour in capitalism make labour an "activity of alienation"—and consequently capitalism inhibits well-being, preventing humans from flourishing.[8] He argues that capitalist "[p]roduction does not simply produce man [*sic*] as a commodity, the human commodity, man [*sic*] in the role of commodity" but it, crucially, "produces him [*sic*] in keeping with this role as a mentally and physically dehumanized being."[9]

Current wide-spread issues of inequality, inequity, precarity, a crisis of well-being, exploitation of vulnerable populations, and environmental catastrophe are by-products of capitalism.[10] Achille Mbembe refers to the world we live in as a necropolitical world which creates "death-worlds:" "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead."[11]

It's All Doom and Gloom

Capitalism has not only resulted in a crisis of different kinds of well-being, but also colonized the concept to profit from it, as we see from the growing well-being industry.[12] Workplace efforts to ensure workers are happy through the provision of well-being offerings not only ignore that it is the work demands that produce the ill-being they are trying to address, but also that they actively maintain a politico-economic system that produces it.[13] It is for such reasons that many argue that mental health problems are most constructively examined as problems of communities or societies.[14]

Franco Bifo Berardi, in his book *Quit Everything*, discusses the effects of the current state of the world on people's mental health, including the resultant wave of depression amongst young people. He suggests that depression has in turn

resulted in the abandonment of hope, but perhaps the condition is not depression as we understand it, but instead "desertion": a withdrawal—conscious or subconscious—of psychological energy and a "disinvestment of desire" in the face of the multiplicity of world-wide problems and suffering, all of which feel unmanageable and unsolvable.[15]

In "Brutalism, Suprematism and Nazi-Libertarianism," and in anticipation of the May 20, 2024 summit of Western right-wing leaders, Berardi suggests that we are, in fact, doomed.[16] He argues that the ultra-reactionary wave we are dealing with is the result of a hyper-liberalism which has instituted competition as the inter-human relations' universal principle. This phenomenon, he argues, cannot simply be explained in political terms, for political interpretation fails to explain the anthropological mutation that is at the core and responsible for "a mass adhesion to ultra-reactionary movements." The explanation he offers is that, whereas historical Nazi-fascism supported state intervention in the economy, the supremacist wave instead combines cultural conservatism and racism with a "hysterical emphasis on economic liberalism." What this supremacist wave is promoting is "brutality and the freedom to be brutal." Berardi proposes that an inversion of ethical judgement has arisen; one that suggests a perversion of psychic processing and perception "even before a moral one: gore capitalism, as Sayak Valencia defined the Mexican reality."[17] He attributes this perversion to three main factors: capitalism's promotion of competition, which has worn away the foundations of solidarity, "ridiculed empathy" for others' suffering, and consequently destroyed social civilization; our decreased ability to decipher the truth or falsity of statements due to our overexposure to information technology; and the immoral and racist attitudes towards the waves of migration from what he figures as the Global South towards the Global North, which reaped the benefits of colonial exploitation of the Global South and has thus far suffered less from climate change. His conclusions are grim. He believes that what fuels the growth of libertarian brutalism is an energy that appears to emerge from the human race's cognitive and technological evolution, and that this energy can only be

stopped, not by political will, but by an opposing and similarly potent energy. He fears, however, that the energy fueling libertarian brutalism will only stop when "it has produced all the effects of which it is capable:" full destruction.[18]

Reinvestment in Hope

As an antidote to Berardi's fears, I would like to, and suggest that we need to, reinvest in desire for change in order to resuscitate and reinvest in hope. This requires an approach to and treatment of politico-economic models as what they are, that is, as experiments that can be ended and replaced by others, and a commitment to imagining alternative politico-economic models.[19] William Davies suggests that it is about writing "economic science fictions"—for capitalist institutions are also founded on fictional expectations and "collectively endorsed fictions" such as the value of money—insisting that it is possible for imagination to intrude into economic life in a manner that is uninvited but also unaccountable and incomputable.[20] If we can write them, and our new fictions are based on an ethical framework founded itself on an understanding that we are bound to one another (to both human and non-human others) by an inescapable and always present sociality,[21] and, therefore, the "life of the other…is also our life,"[22] we might be able to build something that prevents the suffering of others.[23] In fact, we are ethically obliged to build a political economy that establishes politico-economic equality and minimizes precarity, despite the task's difficulty, for:

> We can be alive or dead to the sufferings of others—they can be dead or alive to us. But it is only when we understand that what happens there also happens here, and that "here" is already an elsewhere, and necessarily so, that we stand a chance of grasping the difficult and shifting global connections in ways that let us know the transport and the constraint of what we might still call ethics.[24]

Aiming at a reinvestment in desire and hope, the articles here, in their engagement with the terms performance, politics, and well-being, use methodological approaches and disciplinary understandings from performance studies, political economy, and psychology. They provide insights into the current relationship between politics, human and non-human bodies, and their well-being (and why it is necessary we take action to change that relationship) which might help us steer the wheel before we drive off the cliff.

In "The Problems with the Critique of Political Economy in the Arts," < https://csalateral.org/section/political-economy-and-the-arts/problems-critique-political-economy-arts-you/> Mi You considers existing artistic and theoretical approaches to political economy to be limited to institutional critique or insufficiently historicized, and critiques the arts' dependence on and therefore complicity with globalization. Engaging with a broader definition of the arts that includes both performing and visual arts, she urges a reconsideration of the relationship between political economy and the arts which accounts for the specificities of the current shift into the era of post-globalization. You proposes that a systemic approach is necessary in the arts in order to attend to the complexities and potentials of a "multi-aligned" world and the consequent emergence of institutional models that are based on non-hegemonic positions. Beyond undertaking advocacy work through artistic interventions, she suggests art can contribute to a new political economy by, for example, (re)defining what "binds together a common humanity at all political levels"—and therefore what kind of political economy can ensure humanity's well-being—and participating in the design of both speculative scenarios about the future at the governmental level and of speculative and critical proposals on policy and geopolitics. These speculations can aid the consideration of challenging questions about a multipolar world.

In "Racial Capitalism, Refugee Adjudication, and the Performances of Zama Zama," < https://csalateral.org/section/political-economy-and-the-arts/racial-

capitalism-refugee-adjudication-performances-zama-zama-metzger/> performance is understood as the movement of bodies across borders as the result of forced migration, which hinders any conception of well-being. Sean Metzger discusses how racial capitalism affects bodies and their movement by investigating the intersection of refugee law and racial capitalism and the ways this intersection makes visible "the performance of human migration under duress." He begins by comparing legal instruments in South Africa and the US, and the ways they structure and restrict refugee movement even in what are considered democratic countries. Cedric Robinson's notion of "racial capitalism" and Jodi Melamed's perspectives on it[25] enable an insightful discussion on racial capitalism, the juridical, and zama zamas—refugees working illegally in mining in South Africa. Metzger's account of the refugees, whose precarious and vulnerable circumstances as the results of racial capitalism pushed them to become zama zamas, illuminates the violences inflicted upon bodies by legal systems and corporations. The article makes visible how racial capitalism is predicated on inequality, racism, and disposability and, therefore—while acknowledging that race's function as a "structuring force on a global scale" precedes capitalism—the importance of both alternative critical frameworks and politico-economic models. Crucially, this analysis on refugee law through performance studies demonstrates the impact of material circumstances and juridical systems on the production of refugees, the relation of refugee production to racial capitalism, and refugees' performances of personhood and legibility in these precarious, vulnerable, and oppressive circumstances which are detrimental to their well-being.

In "'A Currency of Happenstance,'" < https://csalateral.org/section/political-economy-and-the-arts/a-currency-of-happenstance-owen/> Louise Owen examines performance and political economy through her close reading of Ryan Gander's participatory art project *The Find* (2023), which engages the audience in chance and decision-making procedures to gather non-monetary coins hidden in public spaces. Owen discusses the work's function in relation to the cost-of-

living crisis and its negative effects on well-being, and the ensuing problematic discourses of self-help to deal with it, since adjusting individual spending patterns cannot address the effects of years of austerity. She argues that the work also raises questions of the modern monetary system and points to the ways coins are both presented as an object of exchange that is circulated and accumulated, and represent a value system which prioritizes attention to money. Owen argues that the construction of *The Find* questions the value placed on money and instead proposes that what is important is the value we place on and therefore the prioritization of relationships and time we spend with others. Ultimately, Owen argues that the cost-of-living crisis and consequently economic necessity drives a lot of our decision making.

In "Young People's Self-Making in Neoliberal Capitalism: Challenges and Opportunities," < https://csalateral.org/section/political-economy-and-the-arts/young-people-self-making-neoliberal-capitalism-butler-coward/> performance is understood as the performance of self in everyday life and in social media. Stephen Butler and Nathaniel Coward discuss capitalism's impact on young people's production and performance of selfhood, evidencing the effects of market societies on young people's mental health and well-being and their susceptibility to mental health issues. Butler and Coward argue that capitalism's competitive and achievement-oriented environment demands success, social status, and the constant performance of young people in social media, resulting in unrealizable levels of self-curation and self-commodification. These demands not only leave young people feeling as if they are failing to meet these extrinsic desires for identity enhancement and status, but, importantly, prevent them from meeting their intrinsic needs for self-worth, belongingness, and relatedness. Crucially, they suggest that, as empirical data shows, the effects of capitalism's emphasis on individualism, private ownership, and competition on young people's health and well-being is greater on those who have fewer opportunities and reduced access to resources as a result of, for example, their racial, gender, and socioeconomic characteristics. Butler and Coward explain that

qualitative and quantitative research documents that capitalism's demands on young people for self-exploitation (exploitation of their skills and self to achieve social and financial success) have negative effects. Until a better politico-economic system addresses the problem at its core, Butler and Coward suggest that to mitigate young people's rising mental health difficulties, their immediate environment (such as their family), as well as educational, cultural, and mental health systems, need to address the issue by protecting young people from pressures for self-optimization and self-exploitation.

Gareth Dale, in "How Vital is Nature? Animated Bodies and Agency in Contemporary Capitalism," < https://csalateral.org/section/political-economy-and-the-arts/how-vital-is-nature-animated-bodies-agency-contemporary-capitalism-dale/> addresses the relationship between politics and the performance of human, non-human, and non-living bodies within capitalism. In particular, he juxtaposes thinking by Indigenous and new-materialist philosophers to examine the political implications of attributing animating and agential characteristics to non-living bodies. By entering in dialogue with Indigenous cosmologies, through the work *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* by Potawatomi bryologist Robin Wall Kimmerer, and new materialist thinking, through US philosopher Jane Bennett's thinking, he demonstrates that considering nature as animated is not necessarily aligned with environmental ethics. For Kimmerer, he explains, the animated world consists of the natural world and some cultural artifacts such as songs, but artificial objects belong to the inanimate world. Kimmerer understands the relationship between humans and non-humans as reciprocal and believes that capitalism and colonialism prohibit this reciprocal relationship. This is because, for one, the market economy aims at infinite growth, which the planet cannot sustain, and "grants personhood to corporations but denies it to the more-than-human beings."[26] Bennett on the other hand considers everything animated, including objects such as computers. Dale argues that Bennett's approach is problematic because it de-emphasizes both human moral responsibility in destroying the

environment and agency in dealing with the ecological crisis, while at the same time exonerates capitalism from the social and environmental violence for which it is responsible. Drawing on Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*,[27] Dale suggests that a dialectical and relational understanding of humans' position in the natural world is necessary to both fully appreciate it and realize the extent to which humans' performance in the world has been undermining nature's animacy and ecological devastation has been affecting the well-being of both human and non-human bodies.

The backdrop of Marina Gržinić's "Without Rethinking Colonialism and Racialization, a Sustainable Future is not Possible" < https://csalateral.org/section/political-economy-and-the-arts/without-rethinking-colonialism-racialization-sustainable-future-is-not-possible-grzinic/> is the global necrocapitalist system of neoliberal capitalism and the landscape of profit above all else it has created, while exploiting everything possible and treating vulnerable populations as disposable in the interest of wealth accumulation. Her text therefore considers the performances of necrocapitalism, its relation to racialization, and its effects on the well-being of bodies, especially vulnerable bodies. She argues that examining the connections and differences amongst post-socialism, post-colonialism, and capitalism are crucial to understanding global politics and provides a diagram illustrating both these relations over time across North, South, West, and the former East, as well as the relation between capital, labor, colonialism, and capitalism across these territories. She argues that the reconsideration of the racial/colonial and imperial/colonial divides is crucial to terminating capitalist colonialism. She closes by reflecting on the mass displacement of refugees, particularly from what she calls the Global South, and the current relationship between the EU and the US, which she characterizes as a "new form of hyper-exploitation and devastation," where the dying US imperial power has turned Europe into "a provincial territory and an area for high-level US financing and extractivism."

The issue's section closes with Tara Fatehi's "Conscious Delirium of a Travelling Body." < https://csalateral.org/section/political-economy-and-the-arts/conscious-delirium-traveling-body-poetics-politics-creative-practice-fatehi/> This text explores relations between bodies, politics, displacement, and coloniality, and their effects through a choreography of creative and critical reflections on artworks and historical events in the UK, Iran, and Gaza across different temporalities, including the ongoing settler-colonial occupation of Palestine. Well-being here is implicitly addressed through the effects of colonialism and displacement on individual and collective bodies. The author/artist interweaves discussion on these events, and her personal experiences related to them, with discussion of two of her projects: her artist residency at the UN Office and her work *Mishandled Archives*. Both projects deal in varying ways with politics of erasure and with an interest in intervening in archives: both personal ones, as in the case of *Mishandled Archives*, and colonial ones, as in the case of her UN Residency. The swinging back and forth across events and projects reflects Fatehi's movement as an artist across countries and her experiences navigating identity labels and dealing with displacement and loss.

We hope these contributions shed some light on the necessity of different disciplinary perspectives in approaching and understanding issues relating to bodies, politics, well-being, and their interrelation, and, consequently, in offering some insights into how we might go about imagining a new political economy. I am grateful to the authors for their insights, to the anonymous reviewers for their labor and feedback, and to *Lateral* for providing the space for these conversations.

Notes

1. For inquiries, please email the *Political Economy and the Arts* editor, Katerina Paramana, at katerinaparamana@hotmail.com with "Political Economy and the Arts" in the email subject line. ↩

2. Research Seminar Series, 2023–2024. “Performance and Political Economy: Bodies, Politics, and Well-Being in the 21st Century.” Curated by Katerina Paramana, Brunel University of London, UK. https://www.brunel.ac.uk/news-and-events/events/2022/images/cbass.png < https://www.brunel.ac.uk/news-and-events/events/2022/images/cbass.png> .

3. *Performance, Cultures and Politics Research Group*, Brunel University of London, UK. https://www.brunel.ac.uk/research/Groups/Performance-Cultures-and-Politics/Centre-members < https://www.brunel.ac.uk/research/Groups/Performance-Cultures-and-Politics/Centre-members> .

4. See, for example: Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Zone Books, 2015); Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Katerina Paramana, *Contemporary Performance and Political Economy: Oikonomia as a New Ethico-Political Paradigm* (Routledge, 2025); Katerina Paramana and Anita Gonzalez, eds., *Performance, Dance and Political Economy: Bodies at the End of the World* (Bloomsbury, 2021); and Katerina Paramana, “The Animation of Contemporary Subjectivity in Tino Sehgal’s *Ann Lee*,” *Performance Research* 24, no. 6 (2019): 114–21.

5. Brown, *Undoing the Demos* 2015; and Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 2008.

6. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 2.

7. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. M. Milligan (Progress Publishers, 1959), https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/preface.htm < https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/preface.htm> .

8. David Watson, “A Marxian Approach to Wellbeing: Human Nature and Use Value,” in *A Modern Guide to Wellbeing Research*, eds. Beverley A. Searle, Jessica Pykett, and Maria Jesus Alfaro-Simmonds (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021), 51–56, https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789900163.00012 < https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789900163.00012> .

9. Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 36.

10. Paramana, *Contemporary Performance and Political Economy*.

11. Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–12, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11 < https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11> .

12. Watson, “A Marxian Approach to Wellbeing,” 52–53.

13. Watson, “A Marxian Approach to Wellbeing,” 52–54. See also Ronald Purser, *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness became the New Capitalist Spirituality* (Repeater Books, 2019).

14. Joanna Moncrieff, "The Political Economy of the Mental Health System: A Marxist Analysis," *Frontiers in Sociology* 6 (2021): 771875, https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.771875 < https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.771875> .

15. Franco Bifo Berardi, *Quit Everything* (Repeater, 2024).

16. Franco Bifo Berardi, "Brutalism, Suprematism and Nazi-libertarianism," *Ildisertore*, May 28, 2024, https://francoberardi.substack.com/p/brutalism-suprematism-and-nazi-libertarianism < https://francoberardi.substack.com/p/brutalism-suprematism-and-nazi-libertarianism> .

17. Berardi, "Brutalism, Suprematism and Nazi-libertarianism."

18. Berardi, "Brutalism, Suprematism and Nazi-libertarianism."

19. Paramana, *Contemporary Performance and Political Economy*.

20. William Davies, ed., *Economic Science Fictions* (Goldsmiths Press, 2018), 21–22.

21. Katerina Paramana, "Re-turning to the Show: Repetition and the Construction of Spaces of Decision, Affect and Creative Possibility," *Performance Research* 20, no. 5 (2015): 116–24.

22. Judith Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2012): 140–41, https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.26.2.0134.

23. Paramana, *Contemporary Performance and Political Economy*.

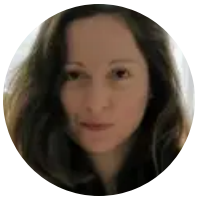
24. Butler, "Precarious Life," 150.

25. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 77, https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.1.0076 < https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.1.0076> .

26. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2015), 376.

27. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*.

Author Information



Katerina Paramana

Katerina Paramana is an artist–scholar and Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) at Brunel University of London, UK. She is author of *Contemporary Performance and Political Economy: Oikonomia as a New Ethico-Political Paradigm* (Routledge, 2025), co-editor of the volumes *Performance, Dance and Political Economy: Bodies at the End of the World* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021) and *Art and Dance in Dialogue* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) and founding book series co-editor of *Dance in Dialogue* (Bloomsbury Academic). Her performances have been presented internationally.

View all of Katerina Paramana's articles.

Article details

Katerina Paramana, "Introduction – Performance and Political Economy: Bodies, Politics, and Well-Being," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.6

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

The Problems with the Critique of Political Economy in the Arts

by Mi You | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024), Political Economy and the Arts

ABSTRACT This article attempts to offer a systemic discussion about the paradigm shift away from the neoliberal Washington consensus and its ramifications for the worlds of performing and visual arts. The article first provides an overview of discussions of political economy in the arts, in which the typically speculative arguments are contrasted with sociological and historical knowledge which reveals a limit to them. The article then describes contemporary political economy in the era of post-globalization and makes a few proposals on how the arts can think through it.

KEYWORDS art, globalization, neoliberalism, political economy

The neoliberal Washington consensus is no more, at least in the West. It is no longer deregulation, trade liberalization, and unfettered market growth that are taken as the only "rational" economic activities, but various other strategies have returned: industrialization, state intervention into ostensibly free markets, international trade policies, and friendshoring (the act of making economic agreements with international allies). While this does not mean neoliberalism is going away any time soon, it does present epistemological implications for those traditionally posited in antagonistic relations with neoliberalism in the arts.[1] The global art world, including contemporary art, performance and performing arts, largely lives off the effect of peak globalization. Will it continue sleepwalking into the next existential crisis? It is time to refocus our critique in the art world by stepping back from the shibboleth and the tendentially totalizing discourse of neoliberalism and associated norms. We need a systemic discussion about the

paradigm shift away from the neoliberal Washington consensus and its ramifications for the worlds of art. This is, however, no neoliberalism denial or apology. In what follows, I will first analyze the limit of political economy discussions in the arts. I will then offer a description of contemporary political economy and make a few proposals that suggest how arts can think through it.

Political Economy Critique in Philosophy and Performance

Capitalism is often said to be an animistic force whereby the capital, far from an inanimate "thing," is rendered as a self-moving and self-positing "subject."[2] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's postulation on the operation of capital in *Anti-Oedipus* is a creative translation of classical historical materialism, bringing into political economy the question of desire and schizophrenia, which for them should both be treated as social phenomena and not merely confined to individual subjects. Following the (perhaps less conventional) route of Pierre Klossowski, they identify desire and its movement as producing the social body. This desire can be seen in capitalism's tendency to liberate all flows and relations from any single organizing body and incorporating new territories, productive elements, and contradictions into its own self-perpetuating process.[3]

Performance studies scholars have embraced this movement in thinking arising from the work of Deleuze and Guattari and applied it to their thinking through bodies.[4] The taskthat ensues hence is how to broaden and repotentiate the very spectrum of bodies and desire constituting social relations and exchanges. Scholars have pointed out how the body's capacity to react before cognitive registration—the indeterminate and pre-individual potential of affect—has been captured by capitalism in the "affect economy."[5] Others hold that affects can be operationalized in other ways for post-capitalist futures. This surplus value

emerging from affect is the potential of the qualitative difference, a "surplus-value of life"; an experienced value that is its own value, worthy for itself.[6]

In trying to resignify value in the era of neoliberal capitalism, performance and cultural scholars have turned to the world of finance. Derivatives are financial instruments that derive their value from an underlying asset or index. As anthropologist Arjun Appadurai[7] argues—expanding the work of Deleuze[8]—derivatives run on a predatory, dividualizing logic: Individuals are broken down to dividuals and fed as data into algorithms, which make derivatives by quantification and mediation (into assets, security, etc.) out of real assets.[9] Yet finance is not the only form derivatives can take on. Performance scholar Randy Martin[10] argues there is a social logic to derivatives. He anchors derivatives—*de rive*—beyond the space of finances into the social realm, recasting the derivative as an excess which captures a relation to the future and a wish to hedge the unknown. For him, there is wealth production in the collective exploration of volatility or collective risk-taking. On the formal level, social derivatives can be found, for example, in collective improvisation, skateboarding, and hip-hop, because of "their bundled attributes of flying low, reversibility (on hands and feet), ensemble-distributed esthetics, and an embrace of risk as reward."[11] Appadurai extends the work of Martin and identifies a moment of "derivative" in the gift economy.[12] A gift creates ties not between two individual entities but rather between dividuals. Each of them is joined by the gift to form new subjectivities. This performativity of the gift allows the subaltern participants to collectively explore volatility—Martin's "derivative"—and establish a sense of collective subjectivity. Appadurai hence calls to resocialize our dividuality which, for him, harbors the potential for radically new forms of collective agency and connectivity that can replace the current predatory forms of dividualism.[13]

While this alignment between distributed bodies, volatilities, and social wealth is pertinent and may indeed insert a sense of purpose in the arts, this mode of post-structuralist thinking follows a logic of the accumulative: "and more, and more,

and more." And finance can be added to the desiring production model, and derivatives, and, and... The possible speculation formulations go on and on. And yet there is a lack of a clear explanatory structure that sets a limit to the incessant "destratification" of theory, that is, there is a deconstructive move against the congealing into fixed identities of things, a permanent movement that brings new elements into alliances. Indeed, as Deleuze and Guattari themselves have precautioned against incessant destratification,

[you] don't reach the BwO [body without organs], and its plane of consistency, by wildly destratifying. ... Staying stratified—organised, signified, subjected—is not the worst that can happen; the worst that can happen is if you throw the strata into demented or suicidal collapse, which brings them down on us heavier than ever.[14]

François Laruelle's notion of the "generic," that one equals the one, resonates with such thinking, positing itself against the endless "and, and, and."[15] Under such a notion, there is no identifiable difference between "generic" and "ordinary" entities. Especially in the face of natural or man-made catastrophes demanding collective action, this notion can be conducive to visions of a social order whereby selfhood is subdued so as to champion a multiplicity, a common collective good. This might leave little room for artistic expression. Or does it? Many working in the arts are categorically against systems and technologies that render one as a "generic" entity, which appear counterintuitive to the post-structuralist vogue for relentless differentiation. But maybe this is exactly what has been missing in the reflection of the arts, an understanding for systems and systematic use of technological tools that is not directed towards the endemic field, but toward the society in general. Counterintuitive for those opposing "neoliberalism" wholesale, quantification, according to left accelerationists Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, "is not an evil to be eliminated . . . [and] network analysis, agent-based modelling, big data analytics, and non-equilibrium economic models, are necessary cognitive mediators for understanding complex systems like the modern economy."[16]

Proposals for computational management of the planet's energy resources, or the functions of an economy, may take many forms, including *Tektology*,[17] cybernetics, and more recently, the various calls to take over the feedback infrastructure.[18] We are starting to observe what such systemic visions of political economy mean for the arts.

Critique of Neoliberalism in the Arts

After three decades of institutional critique in the arts that focuses on the neoliberal conditions of the arts, there seems to be a strange telos that leaves us (critical practitioners) more or less in the same place where the critical project began: one that names rather than intervenes.[19] Yes, it has been iterated time and again how neoliberalism recasts the art world in its own image, whether in the proliferation of immaterial labor or self-entrepreneurialization. This exercise of critique, however, focuses on the local rather than systemic levels. Recently, the jointly penned "Marxist Keywords for Performance"[20] indexed the imprecise critique of neoliberalism in theater and performance studies, and provided a rigorous foundation for the field in the form of concise and accessible introductions to key terms that can support the application of Marxist theory to performance.

Many claims in the art world are complicit in creating an interpretative, rather than an explanatory, framework for assessing their object of critique. An interpretative framework demands a working concept as well as a coherent narrative within the context of the phenomenon, even though such a framework might only reveal certain dimensions of an issue with multiple causes. Hence, due to their unfalsifiability—i.e., the lack of possibility to formulate an alternative hypothesis to prove or disprove the validity of the claim—they present the end, rather than the start of a discussion. Other interpretive frameworks present a lack of sociological or historical knowledge. One patent art theorization is of the notional semblance

between art and speculative financial markets, sometimes glossing over the distinction between a traditional neoliberal logic of financialization and the general notion of speculative markets. While the neoliberal logic reflects itself in the might of financial capital over productive capital via the figure of the shareholder, this does not conversely imply that all speculative markets are automatically neoliberal or that speculation is the central, novel feature of neoliberalism more than it is simply an extension of capitalist abstraction. Speculative pricing in art can be explained in terms of the immanent dynamic of art production itself and its fragile relation to questions of value, without a need to overstate the "foreign influence" of external financializing forces. Empirically, as Olav Velthuis notes, the relationship between the art market and speculation is rather conflicted, with many galleries and collectors actively trying to keep speculators out of the art circuit. Similarly, the actual average holding time of artworks suggests that artworks are not as liquid as commonly thought.[21] The art market, though overwhelmingly populated with object-based artworks, is increasingly inclusive of time-based and body-based works.

This does not refute, however, that contemporary art can aesthetically and philosophically reflect—as all art cannot help but reflect its societal context[22] also communicate with the empirical experience that they reject and from which they draw their content (*Inhalt*). Art negates the categorial determinations stamped on the empirical world and yet harbors what is empirically existing in its own substance." Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedeman (Continuum, 2002).]—the state of financial capitalism. The decoupling between the signifier and signified,[23] the gesture of "nominalism" starting with Marcel Duchamp (through whose nomination a found object becomes art),[24] and the image as a form of production,[25] all point to the uneasy, but perhaps not accidental, relation between speculative thinking in art and aesthetics and speculative thinking in economization and financialization. But rather than that cynicism being the result of an "ontological" takeover of the art world by neoliberalism, it is more likely that art as an autonomous field, including its

market(s), appropriates and integrates neoliberal fragments in accordance with its own logic.

Art is neither the harbinger nor the victim of neoliberalism as much as it is simply its "fellow traveler." Speculation in art as a form of thinking beyond established frames does not neatly map onto financial speculation as a means of pushing the established frames of capital into the future in order to extract its value. Likewise, pinning the perpetual crisis of art and its relation to the social sphere solely on the "nefarious influence" of neoliberalism amounts to little more than muddying the waters. Does this not universalize the "enemy" in ways that lead to a poorer, instrumentalizing notion of art or, conversely, an aestheticization of finance as the purest form of art? All the while, this normalizes a form of critique that misses its target from the start. Exactly at the critical juncture of imminent geopolitical and political economical sea change, it would be more prudent to reevaluate the potentialities but also the unresolved contradictions of art beyond neoliberalism.

The neoliberal practice that upholds economic freedom above all other freedoms is undermined by the compounded polycrisis of the world. For one example, as political scientist Dieter Plehwe points out, managing climate change is unthinkable without infringing on fossil fuel sector property rights.[26] A similar conflict emerges between the "freedom" of economic transactions and the rule of law as protection from discriminatory government policy. Industrial policies such as the CHIPS Act and the Inflation Reduction Act in the US, and the (more modest) European equivalents, effectively undo the formerly prevalent doctrine that states should not direct capitalist development, much less engage in direct economic planning. Much of this is driven by geopolitical sea changes.

Peak Globalization and Peak Global Art Discourses

There is a yawning gap between how practitioners in the arts see globalization, or the world order, and how political scientists do. Much ink has been spilled on international relations (IR) that rearticulate multipolarity under present geopolitical contentions as departing from the old realist ideas of multipolarity or bipolarity. Feng Zhang and Bary Buzan propose "deep pluralism" as a working concept for the political economy, which captures how wealth and power, and cultural and political authority are diffusely distributed.[27] These criteria sharply contrast with the preceding decades of Western domination and globalization, in which wealth and power, as well cultural and political authority, were relatively concentrated.

Art and cultural theory tend to produce theories of globalization that are commensurable from one context to another. In other words, the critique of globalization often reinforces the very idea of globalization. The advent of global art, coming of age as the effect of globalization in the shadow of Western hegemony, is not only polycentric as a practice, but also demands a polyphonic discourse, a global art history.[28] A global art history vacillates between the fact that it is and is not a unified enterprise throughout the world.[29] In performing arts, similar concerns about Eurocentrism have been raised and various attempts to decenter performance have been made.[30] In Marxist analyses of space, for example, globalization and capitalism are argued to *produce* spatial and epistemological difference.[31] In postcolonial theory and decolonial thinking, on the other hand, the world becomes multipolar, multi-narrative, and multi-epistemological by rearticulating global designs from local histories.[32] Schematically, the universalizing process of economic globalization and the proliferation of differences seem to share one explanatory axis that not only rests upon but affirms the irreversibility of globalization. This pluralism under unipolar globalization can play into local power games, as in the multiculturalism that has

been experienced in the West for decades. But it is a stratified version of pluralism, premised on a society in which political, ideological, and economic power coincide ontologically.

Diving beneath the epistemological contours of the theorization of neoliberalization discussed here, Zhivka Valiavicharska recognizes a disjuncture between discourse about art and critical discourse about globalization, especially the role art has played as "an agent and an instrument of social transformation projects with neoliberal agendas,"[33] in concrete instances of "how contemporary art production, art display, and the production of various historical knowledges of art participate in, say, the neoliberal reforms taking place in postsocialist Russia, or the formation of a transnational business class in Hong Kong, or how cultural policy projects have employed the arts towards an eastward expansion of the European Union."[34] The availability and viability of data points make it evident that it is easier to identify the covert operations of cultural politics when the world is opening up, than when it is closing down. If we are to establish a correlation, though not a causal one, between the neoliberalization of a society and certain kinds of artistic expressions, how do these expressions fare now under regimes of ostensible de-globalization? Do they signal the need for a dependency theory of the art world, i.e., that the periphery world will forever serve the needs of the center, as emerging 1970s theory from the Global South argued?[35] Or, given the rising economic and political standing of many non-Western countries, how can they serve as acute reminders of dispersed synchronicities and tenuous interrelations between aesthetics, social transformation, and ideology?

Most of the theories and projects of globalization, whether they come from sophisticated Marxist and post-structuralist critical accounts or from liberal-international spokespersons like in the recent Director-General of the WTO Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala's manifesto for "reimagining—not abandoning—globalization,"[36] not only suppose that globalization and a post-globalized world are dialectically and closely connected, but also structure their critique of Western-ordered

globalization with a lofty imagination of post-globalization as a “better” or true globality without hegemony. Less cheerful analysts point toward an era of “centrifugal multipolarity”[37] where “global growth might produce not harmony and convergence but conflict and contradiction.”[38]

What is the Use of Political Economy Today?

The question of what a post-globalization, multipolar world means is primarily not an epistemological question, but an institutional one. As Quinn Slobodian and Dieter Plehwe write: “It would be ironic [...] if leftist critics became fixated on the realm of ideas while the right adopted materialist explanations of the present.”[39] In light of this historical sea change, how can we return to thinking about redesigning state, legal, social, and economic institutions in a fracturing world for the better?

The geopolitics of global contemporary art, including its discursive and economic fortifications, thrive on a unipolar narrative. In the art world, the counter-movements that emerged during these years are often invoked superficially. When the art world revisits the non-aligned movement (NAM), for example, it can hardly hide the regret that it failed to change the world order in the long run. Yes, Bandung and similar cases are significant for recalling “actually existing” efforts at decolonization and associated emancipatory claims. But can we assume that showing artworks created back in the 1960s and 1970s in the name of solidarity automatically grants them political efficacy today? In such a way, Bandung becomes the canvas onto which today’s social movements based in identification can project their politics and desires. But identification does not equal participation in concrete social movements—even less so through art and culture. Why not study the economic and developmental agenda of NAM, its engagement with existing international institutions? Why not reassess its economic policy

proposals, such as actively seeking foreign direct investment for the "right to development" and not dependency? What's the legacy of the New International Economic Order (NIEO), the revolt of the Global South against global rules in economic, legal, and political terms in the 1970s?[40] If institutional design is anything to go by, seeing NIEO as an "unfailure"[41] that helps denaturalize the inegalitarian global political economy that has been taken as the only viable path,[42] then there is indeed a renewed engagement in the Global South with de-dollarization and a rethink of the IMF and World Bank. Zoltan Pozsar, head of the macroeconomic advisory firm Ex Uno Plures, believes that the current global economic system is at a tipping point. "The global east and south are renegotiating the world order."[43] There is, to update the non-aligned movement for the present, a "multi-aligned" world.[44]

This multi-alignment will likely give rise to the design of institutional architectures of non-hegemonic positions. For practitioners in the arts, we need to be seriously invested in models that move with the moving targets, that is, the complexities of the world. For all the attempts in the art world to mimic the world's political economic organization—often the dreary bits of it in terms of styles and forms of bureaucracy—in the name of critique, it is useful to consider how art could be relevant beyond the current despondency.

If institutions are indeed necessary to addressing complex social needs, then a great deal of imagination and skill are required to identify and manage those needs. Looking beyond the false binary of patriarchal control versus neoliberal abandonment and deregulation, how might useful institutions be still possible if we take certain technical realities seriously?

Art and culture could start with what binds a common humanity, and ensures its well-being, "at all political levels," "from the institutional with processes like COP, IPCC, and new institutions. . . on issues like artificial intelligence or global finance, to the grassroots where the place left vacant by the demise of the World Social

Forum."[45] Artistic strategies undoubtedly can take on the role of creative advocacy, the most notable example being artworks commissioned for the UN Climate Conferences, although they can be met with public enthusiasm or incomprehension. Here the benchmark seems to be asking whether art can have popular appeal and still be conceptually rigorous?[46]

Advancing these agendas demands setting aside value differences, but it would be too exacting to define a teleological happy ending, i.e., a common denominator that holds everything together, a moral sentiment of (post)humanity that is at once too abstract and concrete. Perhaps we should not be talking about aligning values at all but about an instrumental relationship of different systems. We need a clear-headed picture of the planetary not as a naïve escapism from multipolarity, but as arising from the frictions caused by post-globalization multipolarity. Beyond the institutional edifice of the UN, there is perhaps more room for artistic thinking to serve as a force of reason amidst multiple moving targets, be they value systems, geopolitical contexts, or hitherto unthought of technologies and techniques of social ordering.

How can artistic imaginaries gain a life in the public imagination and, crucially, in policy making at the civic and state level? One instance of cultural production being popularly referred to in government circles is the *Ministry of the Future*, a sci-fi novel by US writer Kim Stanley Robinson. The "carbon coin" proposed in the novel that aims to achieve a genuine wealth transfer from affluent countries to poorer ones has a scientific foundation.[47] It elegantly points out the obvious, though inconvenient solution, for addressing global income inequality. Good sci-fi works are essentially deductive mental experiments, whereas in reality nothing is controllable. Like analytical philosophy, designing these imaginative speculations about the future requires establishing a starting point from which subsequent reasoning, scenarios, and consequences are developed as realistically and profoundly as possible. In this regard, not only *Animal Farm*, but also nineteenth-century realist novels and even Marxism can be read as good sci-fi works, as

demonstrations of radical speculation. Through this kind of sci-fi exercise, we could consider challenging questions pertaining to a multipolar world, such as how to move beyond democratic nations, design new state alliances, reconfigure citizenship as a package of unbundled rights (but ensuring the stateless gain rights in the first place), and how to overcome the current right-wing resurgence. In this regard, I am inspired by one my acquaintances, a performer-turned-serious-game-designer, who works from the strategy unit of a national government where they design future scenarios and encourage public officers to performatively explore out-of-the-box thinking.

Where experiments are underway, my analysis can only be telegraphic. This is an era in which we need to update the states, institutions, civic spaces, and value compasses. Art and culture can play a crucial role if they gain a clear picture of the sea changes in political economy and geopolitics. Then, they will not be the mere end product but can move up the scale of complexity.

Notes

1. When I refer to the arts in this article, I include contemporary art, performing arts, and performance art. Even though the economy of performing arts might not be the same as contemporary art, my starting point is the broader terrains on which they converge: their philosophically accorded autonomy, their factual heteronomy to the society, and their critical epistemologies. ↩
2. See, for example, Tom Holert, *Knowledge beside Itself: Contemporary Art's Epistemic Politics* (Sternberg Press, 2020). ↩
3. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press, 1983). ↩
4. See, for example, Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Duke University Press, 2002); José Gil, "Paradoxical Body," *TDR/The Drama Review* 50, no. 4 (2006): 21–35, https://doi.org/10.1162/dram.2006.50.4.21 < https://doi.org/10.1162/dram.2006.50.4.21> ; and Laura Cull, *Theatres of Immanence: Deleuze and the Ethics of Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). ↩
5. Patricia T. Clough, "The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedia and Bodies," *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 1 (2008): 1–22,

https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407085156 < https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407085156> .

6. Brian Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value: A Postcapitalist Manifesto* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
7. Arjun Appadurai, "The Wealth of Dividuals," in *Derivatives and the Wealth of Societies*, ed. Benjamin Lee and Randy Martin (The University of Chicago Press, 2016).
8. Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (1992): 3–7, https://www.jstor.org/stable/778828 < https://www.jstor.org/stable/778828> .
9. Appadurai, "The Wealth of Dividuals."
10. Randy Martin, *Knowledge LTD: Toward a Social Logic of the Derivative* (Temple University Press, 2015).
11. Martin, *Knowledge LTD*, 11.
12. Appadurai, "The Wealth of Dividuals."
13. Appadurai, "The Wealth of Dividuals."
14. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 160–61.
15. François Laruelle, *A Biography of Ordinary Man: On Authorities and Minorities* (Polity, 2018).
16. See Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, "#Accelerate Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics," *Critical Legal Thinking*, May 14, 2013, http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics < http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics> .
17. See Alexander Bogdanov, *Bogdanov's Tektology*, ed. Peter Dudley, trans. V. N. Sadovsky, Andrei Kartashov, Vladimi Kelle, and Peter Bystrov (University of Hull Center for Systems Studies, 1996), https://monoskop.org/images/e/e9/Bogdanov_Alexander_Tektology_Book_1.pdf < https://monoskop.org/images/e/e9/Bogdanov_Alexander_Tektology_Book_1.pdf> . See also Bogdanov's influence on the "social utility" concept developed by Alexander Chayanov and its later repercussions in ecological economics in Eric Magnin and Nikolay Nenovsky, "Calculating without Money: Theories of In-Kind Accounting of Alexander Chayanov, Otto Neurath and the Early Soviet Experiences," *The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 28, no. 3 (2021): 456–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/09672567.2020.1849339 < https://doi.org/10.1080/09672567.2020.1849339> .
18. Evgeny Morozov, "Digital Socialism? The Calculation Debate in the Age of Big Data," *New Left Review* 116/117 (2019), https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii116/articles/evgeny-

morozov-digital-socialism < https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii116/articles/evgeny-morozov-digital-socialism> ; and Daniel Saros, *Information Technology and Socialist Construction: The End of Capital and the Transition to Socialism* (Routledge, 2014).

19. The last wave of the institutional critique is concentrated on the creation of alternative insitutions and the understanding of the art as "instituent practices"; see Gerald Raunig, "Flatness Rules: Instituent Practices and Institutions of the Common," in *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World*, ed. Pascal Gielen (Valiz, 2013). It was conceptualized as "infrastructure critique," "para-institutions" (see Tom Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself: Contemporary Art's Epistemic Politics* {Sternberg Press, 2020}); "translocal organizations" (see Binna Choi and Marion von Osten, "Trans-Local, Post-Disciplinary Organizational Practice: A Conversation between Binna Choi and Marion von Osten," in *Cluster: Dialectionary*, eds. Binna Choi, Maria Lind, Emily Pethick, and Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez {Sternberg Press, 2014}), "alter-institutional," and "para-institutional organizations" (see Sven Lütticken, "Social Media: Practices of (In)Visibility in Contemporary Art," *Afterall* 40 {2015}: 4–19).

20. Jaswinder Blackwell-Pal, Michael Shane Boyle, Ash Dilks, Caoimhe Mader McGuinness, Olive Mckeon, Lisa Moravec, Alessandro Simari, Clio Unger, and Martin Young, "Marxist Keywords for Performance," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 36, no. 1 (2021): 25–53, https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2021.0037 < https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2021.0037> .

21. See Olav Velthuis and Erica Coslor, "The Financialization of Art," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Finance*, ed. Karin Knorr Cetina and Alex Preda (Oxford University Press, 2012); and Clare McAndrew, Suhail Malik, and Gerald Nestler, "Plotting the Art Market: An Interview with Clare McAndrew," *Finance and Society* 2, no. 2 (2016): 151–67, https://doi.org/10.2218/finsoc.v2i2.1728 < https://doi.org/10.2218/finsoc.v2i2.1728> .

22. As Theodor W. Adorno writes: "Yet it is precisely as artifacts, as products of social labor, that they [artworks

23. Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Picasso Papers*, 1st ed. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

24. Marina Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Aesthetics and the Financialisation of the Subject* (Brill, 2018); and Kerstin Stakemeier and Marina Vishmidt, *Reproducing Autonomy: Work, Money, Crisis and Contemporary Art* (Mute, 2016).

25. Jonathan Beller, *Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Dartmouth College Press, 2006).

26. Dieter Plehwe, "Reluctant Transformers or Reconsidering Opposition to Climate Change Mitigation? German Think Tanks between Environmentalism and Neoliberalism," *Globalizations* 20, no. 8 (2023): 1277–95.

27. Feng Zhang and Barry Buzan, "The Relevance of Deep Pluralism for China's Foreign Policy," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 15, no. 3 (2022): 246–71, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poac014 < https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poac014> .

28. Hans Belting, "From World Art to Global Art. View on a New Panorama," *What's next?*, reader, 2013, last accessed March 1, 2023, http://whtsnxt.net/011 < http://whtsnxt.net/011> .

29. James Elkins, *Is Art History Global?* (Routledge, 2007); and Marc James Léger, "Art and Art History after Globalisation," *Third Text* 26, no. 5 (2012): 515–27.

30. See, for example, Rustom Bharucha, *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking Through Theatre in an Age of Globalization* (The Athlone Press, 2000); and Susan Leigh Foster, ed., *Worlding Dance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

31. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Wiley-Blackwell, 1992); and David Harvey, "Globalization and the 'Spatial Fix,'" *Geographische Revue* 2 (2001): 23–30.

32. Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

33. James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska, and Alice Kim, *Art and Globalization* (Penn State University Press, 2015), 91.

34. Elkins, Valiavicharska, and Kim, *Art and Globalization*, 91.

35. See, for example, Samir Amin, *Accumulation on a World Scale: A Critique of the Theory of Underdevelopment*, 2 vols., (Monthly Review Press, 1974).

36. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, "Why the World Still Needs Trade: The Case for Reimagining – Not Abandoning – Globalization," *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 4 (2023): 94–103.

37. Adam Tooze, *Shutdown: How Covid Shook the World's Economy* (Penguin UK, 2021).

38. Adam Tooze, "Chartbook #68 Putin's Challenge to Western Hegemony – the 2022 Edition," *Chartbook*, January 12, 2022, https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-68-putins-challenge-to < https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-68-putins-challenge-to> .

39. Quinn Slobodian and Dieter Plehwe, "Introduction," in *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism*, ed. Dieter Plehwe, Quinn Slobodian, and Philip Mirowski (Verso, 2020), 2.

40. See Nils Gilman, "The New International Economic Order: A Reintroduction," *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 6, no. 1 (2015): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1353/hum.2015.0008 < https://doi.org/10.1353/hum.2015.0008> . Associated movements include the 1967 Arusha Declaration by Julius Nyerere, which proposed to re-politicize, rather than de-politicize money. Julius Nyerere, "The Arusha Declaration and TANU's Policy on Socialism and Self-Reliance," trans. Ayanda Madyibi, *Marxists*, February 5, 1967, https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/nyerere/1967/arusha-declaration.htm < https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/nyerere/1967/arusha-declaration.htm> .

41. Jennifer Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and Beyond* (University of Chicago Press, 2010). ↩

42. See Gilman, "The New International Economic Order"; and Nils Gilman, "Gilman: The NIEO as Usable Past," *Progressive International*, January 4, 2023, https://progressive.international/blueprint/e7bc30e1-d565-47de-a19f-80ad1bce9969-gilman-the-nieo-as-usable-past/en < https://progressive.international/blueprint/e7bc30e1-d565-47de-a19f-80ad1bce9969-gilman-the-nieo-as-usable-past/en> . ↩

43. See Alec Russell, "The à la Carte World: Our New Geopolitical Order," *Financial Times*, August 20, 2023, https://www.ft.com/content/7997f72d-f772-4b70-9613-9823f233d18a < https://www.ft.com/content/7997f72d-f772-4b70-9613-9823f233d18a> ; and Gao Bai, "Trade Wars, Hot Wars and the Rise of the Global South: The Future of the Dollar Standard," trans. David Ownby, *Reading the China Dream*, January 20, 2024, https://www.readingthechinadream.com/gao-bai-on-challenges-to-the-dollar-standard.html < https://www.readingthechinadream.com/gao-bai-on-challenges-to-the-dollar-standard.html> . ↩

44. Multi-alignment means actors other than Washington and Beijing should seek the chance to "develop more effective bilateral relationships with each of the big powers but also to develop deeper strategic relationships with each other." Nader Mousavizadeh, quoted in Russell, "The à la Carte World." ↩

45. As in the call made by Lorenzo Marsili in "From The Age Of Empires To The Age Of Humanity," *Noema*, July 27, 2023, https://www.noemamag.com/from-the-age-of-empires-to-the-age-of-humanity/ < https://www.noemamag.com/from-the-age-of-empires-to-the-age-of-humanity/> . ↩

46. Compare, for example, the cases of Olafur Eliasson's iceberg that sends a brisk message to the public at COP Paris, Mary Ellen Carol's conceptual work at COP Glasgow, and Liam Gillick's cryptic piece that left many non-art professionals perplexed. See "A Climate (Art) Disaster in Paris Gare du Nord," *Independent Scientists with the People*, January 25, 2022, http://independent-scientists.com/a-public-art-disaster-in-gare-du-nord/ < http://independent-scientists.com/a-public-art-disaster-in-gare-du-nord/> . ↩

47. Delton B. Chen, Joel van der Beek, and Jonathan Cloud, "Hypothesis for a Risk Cost of Carbon: Revising the Externalities and Ethics of Climate Change," in *Understanding Risks and Uncertainties in Energy and Climate Policy: Multidisciplinary Methods and Tools for a Low Carbon Society*, ed. Haris Doukas, Alexandros Flamos, and Jenny Lieu (Springer, 2018); and Chris Taylor, "Fight Carbon. With Coin," *Mashable*, 2021, https://mashable.com/feature/carbon-coin-climate-change-crypto < https://mashable.com/feature/carbon-coin-climate-change-crypto> . ↩

Author Information

Mi You

Mi You is a curator and professor of Art and Economies at the University of Kassel / documenta Institut, where she leads the research on the social, economic, and political conditions of art, the current ideological regroupings in art and culture, and where she incubates projects on “upstreaming art” as well as on sustainable cultural funding policies. She’s the author of the book *Art in a Multipolar World* (Hatje Cantz, 2024). As a curator, she works between ancient and futuristic imaginaries of societies and technologies, and the history, political theory and philosophy of Eurasia. Her most recent exhibitions include the 13th Shanghai Biennale (2020–21) and “Lonely Vectors” at Singapore Art Museum (2022), “Clouds, Power and Ornament” at Centre for Heritage, Arts and Textile (2023), and “Really? Art and Knowledge in Time of Crisis” at Framer Framed (2024). On the social front, she serves as chair of committee on Media Arts and Technology for the transnational NGO Common Action Forum and is a Berggruen Institute Europe fellow (2023–24).

View all of Mi You's articles.

Article details

Mi You, "The Problems with the Critique of Political Economy in the Arts," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.7

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Racial Capitalism, Refugee Adjudication, and the Performances of Zama Zama

by Sean Metzger | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024), Political Economy and the Arts

ABSTRACT This essay investigates the category of the refugee as an instantiation of racial capitalism. To illustrate this conjunction, it first examines international law that defines refugees and, then, looks to specific national jurisprudence that accords different recognition to them. The national contexts discussed are the United States, given that the racial discourse there serves as a ground for the most widely known theorization of racial capitalism via Cedric Robinson's book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, and South Africa, where racial capitalism was first coined. Robinson's work is briefly elaborated in relation to subsequent scholarship that has engaged and extended the concept of racial capitalism, in relation to the particularities of South Africa racialization, and in relation to zama zamas (unregulated miners, often perceived as foreigners who threaten the Rainbow Nation's stability in various ways). Given limitations of space, the essay uses the overview of juridical regimes and the excursus on Robinson to rethink the category of refugee. Zama zamas and the history of the South African mining sector as it informs understandings of race are posited as a fruitful direction for further research because these phenomena help to extend the entwinement of race and refugee and the implications of Robinson's text for understanding refugees anew.

KEYWORDS Black Marxism, South Africa, law, performance, racial capitalism, refugees, zama zama

Cedric Robinson's notion of "racial capitalism" as articulated in his book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Condition* (1983) offers a productive lens to analyze the legal structures that condition refugee movements, especially in the contexts of South Africa and the US. Given that both nation-states are

ostensible bastions of democratic processes enshrined to differing degrees in each nation's respective legislation, their comparison reveals the fault lines of democracy and the movements of peoples that one might assume could happen under that rubric. South Africa is an especially interesting example for any study of refugees because of its relatively recent moves to codify policy as part of the embrace of new forms of governance in the wake of apartheid, the regime under which the term racial capitalism first originated. Thinking about refugee law and racial capitalism as they intersect illuminates aspects of the performance of human migration under duress. Can thinking through ostensibly non-racial categories like zama zama (miners working illegally in South Africa) imagine the relations of the juridical, racial capitalism, and refugees anew? My analysis will first concentrate on legal instruments as structuring devices that produce certain conditions of possibility for human flight and movement before proceeding to analyze racial capitalism as a concept. I conclude by very briefly bringing these fields together in the discussion of zama zama and pointing out that an analysis of refugee law through performance studies has the potential to expose and even interrupt vectors of power. By request and design, this essay is intended as a provocation for further research as opposed to a complete analysis.

Refugee Law and Its Impacts

Both the US and South Africa are now bound to the 1951 Refugee Convention (an agreement between the UN and the document's signatories) and the 1967 Protocol (an amendment to the previous document). The main criterion for determining status was demonstration of persecution by the state based on any of several categories, specifically "race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion."[1] As I and others have argued elsewhere, such criteria compel individuals to perform in ways legible to adjudicative bodies.[2] When it was initially conceived, then–US President Truman refused to sign on the basis that the Convention infringed on US autonomy. South

Africa did not sign because it was suspended from UN activities so long as apartheid was in force from 1948–1994. The birth of the Rainbow Nation engaged the new South Africa with a host of international norms as evidenced with the country's signing of the Convention in 1996. The 1951 UN Convention sets the ground of policy to all signatories at the international level. It maintains, for example, the principle of non-refoulement—the idea that a state cannot return people to a state that would persecute them.

As a balance to some of the Eurocentric assumptions in the earlier international agreement, South Africa is also signatory to the 1969 African Union Convention (initially it was the OAU, or Organisation of African Unity, established by Kwame Nkrumah and Haile Selassie.) That Convention institutes a broader definition of refugee than the UN's. It specifically adds, "The term 'refugee' shall also apply to every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality."[3] At the international scale, then, South Africa's refugee policies are more robust than the US's. "Events seriously disturbing public order" might be seen as a relatively comprehensive criterion for claiming refugee status, and that phrase potentially does several things. Whereas individuals usually need to claim to be and perform as particular objects of persecution under the UN's guidelines, the ability to petition because of an event would potentially authorize the claims of those who would seek refugee status on the basis of regime or even climate change.[4]

Beyond such international instruments, the US and South Africa have each worked through national legislation to address refugees. The US passed the Refugee Act in 1980 in the ongoing aftermath of the American wars in Southeast Asia; the legislation also addressed the Mariel Boatlift in the same year, an event that brought over a hundred thousand Cubans to Florida. In this regard, the Act

was a Cold War imperative to help people imperiled by American imperialism in those regions. This assistance extended to folks the CIA trained as informants and assassins (which generated problems later). The specific language offered in the Act is to "provide a permanent and systematic procedure for the admission of refugees of special humanitarian concern to the United States."[5] Unlike some other moments of massive refugee movement, the 1980s refugee movements were racialized in the US. Together with the mass investment of popular culture in particularly Vietnam, the refugee would come to be seen, and largely continues to be seen, as a racial figure. Indeed, the provisions of the Act basically follow from the expectations of racial capitalism. Among other directives, the Act established a Refugee Resettlement Program, which emphasized English-language training and employment. In US refugee policy today, we see that the specific color of that figure changes over time, but both racial otherness and Cold War tensions continue to haunt refugee discourse. This point is manifest in the treatment of recent flows of Ukranian refugees (admitted) and Mexican and Central American refugees (denied or otherwise suspended in liminal states).

By comparison, South Africa's refugee policies may perhaps seem less explicitly about race, given the demographics of the country and the current migration patterns there. However, like the US, race serves as the foundation upon which national institutions have been built. The new South Africa inherited racist immigration legislation like the Aliens Control Act (1991), which granted the Minister of Home Affairs a sweeping set of unchecked powers and which was not replaced in full until 2004. Arguably certain provisions of the Act, such as those involving passports, drew on previous pass laws, themselves notorious apartheid instruments for biopolitical management to control racialized movement through the country. This technology was itself of colonial origin. One legacy here is the Immigration Act of 2004's asylum transit pass that provides fourteen days of travel from a designated port of entry to reach a Refugee Reception Office in a major city. After that time, and perhaps, if some have their way, after five days, the petitioner would be in the country without legal status.[6] The chief legislation at

the national level for dealing with questions of refugees are South Africa's Refugee Act 130 of 1998, the Immigration Act of 2004, and the Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights in South Africa pertains to all people in the country; in the US, some protections are afforded to everyone, while others, arguably, just to citizens. As with the 1969 African Union Convention, South Africa's Refugee Act offers relatively generous provisions compared to the US. For example, a refugee can receive permanent residence after five years of continuous residence in South Africa. In the US, a refugee has to apply for permanent residence after one year. The US can reject an applicant solely on the basis of applying after the deadline, meaning that a refugee has to learn the bureaucracy of immigration comparatively quickly. Moreover although it does not cost money to apply for asylum in the US, asylees benefit from consultations with lawyers, which can be expensive. Denial of a petition usually results in removal proceedings.

The above said, perhaps the most formative racial legislation that has had an ongoing impact on refugees in South Africa was the 1913 Land Act and its antecedents. These legal instruments dispossessed Black South Africans of their lands and severely restricted movement and property ownership. The jurisprudence became a cornerstone on which apartheid was built and formalized. Such restrictions press not only on whether internally displaced persons qualify as refugees, but they also bear on how refugees are racialized.[7] In both the US and South Africa, anti-refugee discourse remains persistent. While actual claims for refugee status are adjudicated at the level of the nation-state, this process frequently generates many problems despite the fact that refugees are theoretically subject to a particular country's legislation *as it interacts with* international law and peremptory norms (those that would establish a baseline standard for the treatment of humans).

In the US, the contradictions of refugee law quite clearly involve anxieties about race. To summarize the point, the treatment of the refugee throws into relief the particular racial biases in the American iteration of democracy. As an example,

one might look at the legacy of the CIA's training of Hmong villagers in the Secret War to fight the communist forces of the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. When the US lost, those soldiers were at risk, and many were given refugee status in the US as allies, because they were considered of "special humanitarian concern to the US." Many of these folks, who were trained as killers, suffered from PTSD and other ailments. When adjustment to civilian life in a new country proved difficult and one of these soldiers killed someone on US territory, these former allies were re-racialized as dangerous or subversive refugees who threatened the American social order. Rather than justifying murder, this example illustrates the irony in the US training someone to kill and then being surprised when that happens in the midst of stressful transitions with violence performed looming over the perpetrators. Nevertheless, scholarship has shown how the forgetting of history and the maintenance of racial categories reify tropes like the Asian communist spy or the Asian gangster.[8]

In South Africa, refugees most often conjure an expressly different but related phenomenon: xenophobia. Indeed, virtually all of the press I have seen invokes xenophobia as the key issue in the South African reception of refugees.[9] Indeed the vast majority of arrests of zama zamas were of undocumented immigrants.[10] However, I would not easily equate South African xenophobia with race. I would instead suggest that racial capitalism animates xenophobia and that it might be productive to thus see xenophobia as racism in a particular guise. As an example, we might turn to July of 1998, when the Refugee Act was still a White Paper. At that time, the newspaper *The Sowetan* reported on June 22, 1998 that then–Home Affairs Minister (1994–2004) Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who remained in political office until his death at age 95 in 2023, opined the government "does not accept that its refugee policy should be cast so widely as to include victims of poverty and other economic hardships or environmental disasters."[11] That statement may contradict the provisions of the 1969 OAU Convention, and it is often the charge that refugees should not simply be migrants looking for better work opportunities.

Racial Capitalism

To unpack the paradoxes of Buthelezi's assertion above requires a discussion of racial capitalism. *Black Marxism* uses "refugee" sparingly, but Robinson does see that term as an effect or index of racial capitalism. Robinson deploys the term perhaps half a dozen times including as bookends. The first mention is when he describes the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Huguenot refugees, who establish England's silk industry.[12] Robinson argues that this debunks the idea that the national is the appropriate scale for analysis of the proletariat. The use of immigrant labor for purposes of production from feudalism forward reveals that, "The tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into 'racial' ones. . . . [A]t the systemic interlocking of capitalism in the sixteenth century, the peoples of the Third World began to fill this expanding category of a civilization reproduced by capitalism."[13] This statement does not completely explain capitalism's relation to race as it opens more questions about those connections. Put otherwise, Robinson sets up an argument he does not fully resolve.

Pace Karl Marx, Robinson argues that slavery is not precapitalist, or what Marx considered part of primitive accumulation. Instead, Robinson demonstrates, as illustrated above, that capitalism as a mode of production harnesses social differences of many sorts (not just the bourgeoisie versus proletariats) for production. As Jodi Melamed writes, "antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires"; in short, she states, "capitalism *is* racial capitalism."[14] She also attends to the other part of Robinson's title because the Black Radical Tradition is "a name for struggles that arrange social forces for Black survival over and against capital accumulation."[15] As she subsequently explains, knowledge projects—whether the Black Radical Tradition

that is part of Robinson's interest or Melamed's focus on "Indigenous activism and Indigenous critical theory"—enable us to analyze and find alternatives to the effects of capitalism.[16] In Melamed's words, "Capital partitions, divides, and separates groups between political geographies and is the dominant relation to flow between and bind them. What is stripped out are other (and other possible) relations to land, resources, activity, community, and other possible social wholes that have been broken up for capital."[17] Interestingly, she, like Robinson, advocates for critical frameworks that arguably precede capitalism to foster solutions to the problems that system generates.

Although I do not wish to contend that the production of refugees results solely from capitalism, I do want to acknowledge that this mode of production plays a pivotal role in the construction of refugees as we understand that category today. In line with Robinson, refugees function as labor. His brief discussions further imply that situating refugees as a political problem of governmental persecution fails to capture how racialism always inheres in that categorization. In this regard, in their introduction to their anthology *Colonial Racial Capitalism*, Susan Koshy, Lisa Marie Cacho, Jodi A. Byrd, and Brian Jordan Jefferson write, following Ruth Wilson Gilmore, that differences of which Robinson speaks "refer to unequal social relations, which can— but do not always or necessarily— correspond to skin color."[18] What exactly is the racial in racial capitalism and how does it shape the refugee?

Robinson provides one response to this query when he argues early in his text that, "As a material force . . . it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism."[19] Certainly if racialism is an economic force as he suggests, then even a classical Marxist would likely agree with that assertion as base determines superstructure. For Koshy and the other editors of *Colonial Racial Capitalism* the tying together of race and economics affords Robinson the ability to theorize "on a world scale."[20] In turn, Zachary Leveson and Marcel Paret have traced the South African tradition of

racial capitalism that preceded Robinson within debates animating the anti-apartheid movement; in their view, this story of emergence requires greater analysis and scrutiny because of tensions within such constituencies including the South African Communist Party and the African National Congress in the 1970s that might stand in for a much larger array of groups focused on class and racial differentiation in the period.[21] Ultimately, they see the South African tradition of racial capitalism as a strategic coalescing of race and class into a singular unit of struggle. That strategic positioning also reveals how refugees function in relation to racial capitalism.

For example, in the 1976 document *Foreign Investment and the Reproduction of Racial Capitalism in South Africa*, the authors call attention to how foreign, particularly British, investment became critical, "both in the giving countries and in the receiving country," especially in the mining sector.[22] They further aver that, "The British state, acting on behalf of British capital involved in the South African economy, intervened in 1900 to assume a hegemony in South Africa under which was created the foundations of South Africa's racial capitalism and the modern apartheid regime."[23] They continue to show how "racial differentiation was institutionalized within the South African working class on terms which perpetuated the profits of the mining industry."[24] The reverberations of these findings extend beyond the period to the present discussions of zama zama (usually constructed as foreigners as illustrated, for example in Rosalind Morris's documentary *We Are Zama Zama*).[25] In addition, works like Uhuru Portia Phalafala's *Mine Mine Mine* illustrate in poignant detail how the South African mining industry has created conditions for domestic exploitation and fracture in ways that mirror some of the discourse around the zama zamas, with impacts that far exceed a single generation of people.[26] In other words, the mining industry created conditions of refugeetude not only for workers who cross national borders but also for those who cross the country in need of livelihood and in thrall to capital accumulation.[27]

Before returning to zama zama a bit more, further observations about South African mining and racial capitalism are worth elaborating for the present argument. First, the development of gold fields coincided with various jurisprudence that included the Land Act. Foreign investment thus involved the increasing need for and regulation of internal migration within the country and, indeed, forced movement for people to survive. Second, although the authors of the 1976 document on foreign investment and racial capitalism focused primarily on Black and white racialization, historian Mai Ngai has demonstrated how Chinese migrant workers complicate this story. Although her study is too large to unpack here, one generative thread of her work is its demonstration of how the mining industry drew on both domestic *and* foreign labor to create the conditions for the ascension of monopoly and finance capitalism.[28] Here the mines demonstrate racial capitalism, more or less as Robinson understood it but with specific attention to the multiple iterations of race performed both nationally and transnationally.

Nevertheless, such understanding remains incomplete because race has long been a structuring force on a global scale, that is, well before the advent of capitalism. In this regard, Denise Ferreira da Silva's work is particularly useful. In her first book, *Towards a Global Idea of Race*, Ferreira da Silva specifically argues that race relations do not explain racial subjection. Instead, racial subjection is a condition of possibility for the post-Enlightenment subject to emerge. In her second book, *Unpayable Debt*, Ferreira da Silva also explores the legacy of slavery to explore questions of law and value. Her analysis in this speculative exercise interrogates the state and capital accumulation by exploring some of the contradictions manifested through what she calls the wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation. The chapters work to dismantle assumptions that undergird racial discourse. Chapter three brings in readings of Cedric Robinson in order to set up a long analysis of several of Karl Marx's writings. The critique of Robinson hinges on the fact that Robinson's formulation of the Black Radical Tradition rests on framing blackness as a kind of consciousness or subjectivity

emergent from Africa that is both anterior and exterior to the development of capitalism.[29] In other words, Blackness for Robinson might be said to structure the operations of capitalism and the means to think about alternatives to such a system. But his logic would seem to expose a liberal, post-Enlightenment kind of thinking that remains relatively uninterrogated. As one example, Robinson retains a kind of linear progression that Ferreira Da Silva insists cannot hold if there is to be an unthinking of the dominant system of capitalism. Racial terms like "slave," "negro," and "coolie" all constitute what she calls in her first book an "affectable other," who may or may not function as what she calls in her second the "wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation" in a global capitalist system. That said, contemporary terms in use in South Africa like refugee, "undesirable people" (folks who have had visas expire and can't come officially back without an appeal process), and zama zamas are also figures of value and/or disposability. Such figures have the capacity to reveal the contradictions of capitalism.

Here I push again on the refugee and move back to Robinson's *Black Marxism*, despite its problems, and to Ferreira Da Silva's *Toward a Global Idea of Race* and *Unpayable Debt* because they share an investment in what the articulation of race might do even if they do not agree on how it is constituted or what its effects might be. Towards the end of his text, Robinson writes that, "Substantial numbers of the world's Black peoples are under the threat of physical annihilation or the promise of prolonged and frightening debilitation."[30] He was writing in the 1980s when mass famine in Ethiopia dominated the headlines. He continues by noting that material conditions have produced, "Black refugees drifting helplessly beyond the threshold of human sensibility."[31] It is the Black Radical tradition that might render this problem intelligible and offer solutions. In other words, the Black refugee is the figure that occupies his attention as he closes *Black Marxism*, and that figure generates a kind of aporia.

Ferreira Da Silva, perhaps, provides one response: for her part, she also discusses refugees in *Unpayable Debt* in the same chapter that she discusses Robinson.

However, when it comes to this topic, Slavoj Žižek rather than Robinson is her interlocutor. In the subsection entitled "A Price for European Hospitality," she opens with an epigraph from Žižek's "We Can't Address the EU Refugee Crisis without Confronting Global Capitalism." Here is a relevant excerpt of that quotation by Žižek: "Refugees should be reassured of their safety, but it should also be made clear to them that they have to accept the area of living allocated to them by European authorities, plus they have to respect the laws and social norms of European states."[32] Ferreira da Silva's reading of Žižek is worth quoting at length because it potentially applies to the construction of refugees in many national discourses. According to Ferreira da Silva, Žižek misunderstands,

> how the Colonial and the Racial have always been and remain integral to the functioning of capital, and assumes that the total and symbolic violence that produces the figure of the Racial/Cultural Other of Europe has no juridical or economic or ethical relevance for what unfolds in the global present. In Žižek's text we find (a) a repetition of Marxism's disavowal of the juridical and economic relevance of coloniality and raciality, and (b) a reflective repetition of the racial dialectic, which results in an appeal to state protection (which sounds like self-preservation [of one's way of life]), which again (c) returns total violence to the racial "other."[33]

Put simply, Zizek's discourse about the refugee obscures race. The material and discursive conditions upon which the European subject is predicated depend on rendering Others vulnerable and exploiting them. The plight of the refugee cannot be addressed by the structures that facilitated their coming into being in the first place.

Zama Zama and Tentative Conclusions

In August 2023, I watched the current South African Minister of Home Affairs (since 2019) Aaron Motsoaledi talking to JJ Tabane on the South African talk show *Power to Truth*.[34] To summarize, the Minister said the government

understood immigration issues differently in 1994. South Africa made a mistake in signing without reservations the UN Convention on Refugees, the 1967 Protocol, and the OAU Convention. In this vein, zama zama constitute not evidence of ongoing Black disenfranchisement through racial capitalism but a particular breed of opportunistic and violent foreigners extracting South Africa's wealth. Motsoaledi's formulation is vexing and inaccurate.

Over six thousand mines have been abandoned since the decline of the South African mining industry in the mid-1980s. That formally neglected infrastructure has given rise to a robust informal economy with tens of thousands engaging in illegal mining as employment opportunities within South Africa and surrounding nation-states have dwindled. As one example, an *Eye Witness* news feature reported on Mpumalanga province. One interviewee named Given Masina from the town of Ermelo states that the coal from the zama zamas "really helps us because we have dire electricity issues," given that the government is "failing to deliver services to our communities." Another informant called "Anonymous Artisanal Miner" from the village of Boekenhouthoek in the same province explains that, "A lot of people have homes because of . . . [his] work" extracting gemstones from the subterranean tunnels.[35] Zimbabwean Jefferson Ncube, a University of Pretoria graduate, turned to an old DeBeers mine to make a living. Andrew Cloete, a longtime zama zama, has also eeked out a subsistence living; as he notes, "The companies left us like they found us—with nothing. But if we just sit there thinking about it, our kids will die. So we, the diggers, come in here and take the scraps."[36]

Notwithstanding the frequent charges of foreigners' opportunism, the history of mining in South Africa has long been linked to a domestic and transnational workforce. As a writer from *The New Yorker* frames it, "The economic logic of the mines also demanded an inexhaustible supply of cheap Black labor. ...[B]etween 1910 and 1960, according to one estimate, five million mine workers travelled between South Africa and Mozambique alone."[37] The article proceeds to discuss

how the new informal mining activity has produced new elites, "similarly based on Black labor."[38] As illicit mining activity, which has always been part of the industry, has increased significantly in scale, occasional tales of prosperity emerge from both the digging itself and from ancillary activities, such as providing food or other resources to workers or, in another vein, from theft by armed gangs who rob the miners of their bounty.

Zama zamas thus inhabit a realm of Black fugitivity. In that vein, the zama zamas clearly expose the faultlines of state protections on all sides. As a salient illustration, the *Mail and Guardian* reported that, "According to the department of mineral resources and energy (DMRE), the economy lost about R49 billion in 2019 to illegal mining. It added that mining companies spend over R2 billion on security just to prevent these illicit activities."[39] At the same time, the zama zamas themselves have been subjected to many forms of violence including killings carried out by mining corporation representatives. Informal mining work places the workers in positions of precarity, but with the caveat that some of their labor clearly benefits the communities that the state has failed. Put another way, we might say that zama zamas engage in forms of accumulation that attempt to redistribute wealth to those the state has ignored and bring attention to the plight of the powerless in structures of governance. On a less optimistic note, the mine shafts have received an uncountable number of bodies of those lost to falling rock or to the ambitions of competitors. Here racial capitalism is useful because it reveals how the quest for profit is predicated not only on disregard for others' well-being but on the lives of the vulnerable.

Given this situation, innovations to recuperate zama zamas back into sanctioned hierarchies of employee and employer relationships may further result in unforeseen collaborations between individuals and institutions. The case of Mhlonipheni Mavuso, a zama zama since 1997, provides one example. Mavuso turned to this toil, "For my family and I to go to bed on a full stomach."[40] Given his vast experience in the trade, Bosveld Mines decided to work with rather than

against Mavuso and the artisanal miners he led in an experiment where individuals were offered work through cooperatives or as full-time employees. That experiment lowered the risk for both sides involved in negotations, although it remains to be seen whether such a contract structure remains viable. If it does, it offers a path forward for many refugees pushed to cross borders and become zama zamas. Another example is the development of a different artisanal scale mining cooperative that has tried to employ women in the diamond belt.[41]

Much of the work on refugees and performance studies have attempted to demonstrate lifeworlds beyond legal strictures whether through representation of, or performance with, refugees.[42] An analysis of refugee law through performance studies can provide a heuristic to map vectors of power and also to imagine how they might be interrupted. How does an individual perform legibility in terms of the norms that govern juridical structures of refugee identification? What is missing from such performative productions of personhood? For me such a project is critical because refugees are produced as much through rhetorical performances as material circumstances. Those rhetorical performances and material circumstances I insist are linked to racial capitalism, and this essay has attempted to illustrate some of these conjunctions.

Acknowledgments

I want to extend heartfelt thanks to Uhuru Phalafala and Tina Steiner of the University of Stellenbosch and Karen Harris of the University of Pretoria for their comments on this essay and for helping me with some of the research. I also thank the audiences at the talks I gave at those institutions as well as those at the PSi conference at the University of Witwatersrand during the summer of 2023. Finally, thanks to my research assistants Devon Baur and Qianxiong Yang as well as the anonymous reviewer for their comments.

Notes

1. “Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees,” UNHCR, 16, https://www.unhcr.org/media/convention-and-protocol-relating-status-refugees < https://www.unhcr.org/media/convention-and-protocol-relating-status-refugees> .

2. For a brief overview of such discussions, see Sean Metzger, “Editorial: Refugee Processing,” *Theatre Journal* 75, no. 3 (2023): xiii–xxi.

3. “OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, Adopted by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government at Its Sixth Ordinary Session, Addis-Ababa, 10 September 1969,” UNHCR, 5, https://www.unhcr.org/media/oau-convention-governing-specific-aspects-refugee-problems-africa-adopted-assembly-heads < https://www.unhcr.org/media/oau-convention-governing-specific-aspects-refugee-problems-africa-adopted-assembly-heads> .

4. It is worth noting that these conventions are predicated on the crossing of international borders. The Kampala Convention would potentially offer greater protections to Internally Displaced People throughout the African continent, but South Africa has yet to ratify it.

5. Refugee Act of 1980, Pub. L. 96-212, 94 Stat. 102, § 101, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-94/pdf/STATUTE-94-Pg102.pdf < https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-94/pdf/STATUTE-94-Pg102.pdf> .

6. V. Kleinsmidt and D. Manicom, “A Policy Analysis of the Refugee Act 130 of 1998,” *Africa Insight* 39, no. 4 (2010): 8, https://doi.org/10.4314/ai.v39i4.54671 < https://doi.org/10.4314/ai.v39i4.54671> .

7. On internally displaced persons, see Toyin Falola and Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso, “Internal Displacement in Africa,” in *African Refugees* (Indiana University Press, 2023); see also Loren B. Landau, “Urban Refugees and IDPs,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, eds., Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, and Nando Sigona (Oxford University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199652433.013.0012 < https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199652433.013.0012> .

8. On these issues, see Ma Vang, *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies*, 1st ed. (Duke University Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478012849 < https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478012849> . Within theatre specifically, see Sean Metzger, “Southeast Asian American Theatre: Refugee Memories and Enacting Home,” in *Milestones in Asian American Theatre,* ed. Josephine Lee (Routledge, 2023), 167–86.

9. Such reporting has been relatively consistent over the last several decades. For examples, see Alan Martin, “Uncovered: The Dark World of the Zama Zamas,” *Enact Policy Brief* 8, no. 4 (2019): 4, https://enactafrica.org/research/policy-

briefs/uncovered-the-dark-world-of-the-zama-zamas < https://enactafrica.org/research/policy-briefs/uncovered-the-dark-world-of-the-zama-zamas> ; and Des Parker, "Immigration Policy Cause of Xenophobia," *The Daily News*, June 6, 1997, 14. This trend of reporting, even when it does not specifically invoke xenophobia as such, often details ostensible economic costs to the country and the violence enacted through the informal mining sector. In this vein, see Kimon de Greef, "The Dystopian Underworld of South Africa's Illegal Gold Mines," *The New Yorker*, February, 20, 2023, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/02/27/the-dystopian-underworld-of-south-africas-illegal-gold-mines < https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/02/27/the-dystopian-underworld-of-south-africas-illegal-gold-mines> . ↩

10. Tapiwu Madimu, "'Illegal' Gold Mining and the Everyday in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Review of African Political Economy* 49, no. 173 (2022): 440, https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2022.2027750 < https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2022.2027750> . ↩

11. Joe Mdhlela, "Refugee Law Unveiled," *The Sowetan*, June 22, 1998, 10. ↩

12. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 23. ↩

13. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 26. ↩

14. Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 77, https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.1.0076 < https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.1.0076> . ↩

15. Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," 80. ↩

16. Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," 83. ↩

17. Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," 81. ↩

18. Susan Koshy, Lisa Marie Cacho, Jodi A. Byrd, and Brian Jordan Jefferson, eds., *Colonial Racial Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2022), 2, https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478023371-001 < https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478023371-001> . ↩

19. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 2. ↩

20. Koshy et al., *Colonial Racial Capitalism*, 1. ↩

21. Zachary Levenson and Marcel Paret, "The South African Tradition of Racial Capitalism," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46, no. 16 (2023): 3403–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2219300 < https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2219300> . ↩

22. Martin Legassick and David Hemson, *Foreign Investment and the Reproduction of Racial Capitalism in South Africa* (Anti-Apartheid Movement, 1976), 1. ↩

23. Legassick and Hemson, *Foreign Investment*, 3. ↩

24. Legassick and Hemson, *Foreign Investment*, 4. ↩

25. *We Are Zama Zama*, directed by Rosalind Morris (RoCam Productions, 2021). ↩

26. Uhuru Portia Phalafala, *Mine Mine Mine* (University of Nebraska Press, 2023). ↩

27. On refugeetude, see Vinh Nguyen, "Refugeetude: When Does a Refugee Stop Being a Refugee?," *Social Text* 37, no. 2 (June 2019): 109–31, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7371003 < https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7371003> . ↩

28. Mae M. Ngai, *The Chinese Question: The Gold Rushes and Global Politics* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2021). ↩

29. Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt* (Sternberg Press, 2022), 174. ↩

30. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 317. ↩

31. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 317. ↩

32. Slavoj Žižek, "We Can't Address the EU Refugee Crisis Without Confronting Global Capitalism," *In These Times*, September 9, 2015, https://inthesetimes.com/article/slavoj-zizek-european-refugee-crisis-and-global-capitalism < https://inthesetimes.com/article/slavoj-zizek-european-refugee-crisis-and-global-capitalism> , quoted in Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt*, 215. ↩

33. Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt*, 219. ↩

34. JJ Tabane and Aaron Motsoaledi, "Power to Truth with JJ Tabane | Dr Aaron Motsoaledi," *Enca*, August 2, 2023, https://www.enca.com/shows/power-truth-jj-tabane-dr-aaron-motsoaledi-02-august < https://www.enca.com/shows/power-truth-jj-tabane-dr-aaron-motsoaledi-02-august> . ↩

35. Eyewitness News, "'I support my child with this work', Unemployment Forces Mpumalanga's Residents to Become Zama Zamas," *YouTube*, April 14, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V72etcMw-pg < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V72etcMw-pg> . ↩

36. Tommy Trenchard, "Diamond Diggers in South Africa's Deserted Mines Break the Law —And Risk Their Lives," *NPR*, November 27, 2022, https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2022/11/27/1132369294/diamond-diggers-in-south-africas-deserted-mines-break-the-law-and-risk-their-liv < https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2022/11/27/1132369294/diamond-diggers-in-south-africas-deserted-mines-break-the-law-and-risk-their-liv> . ↩

37. De Greef, "The Dystopian Underworld." ↩

38. De Greef, "The Dystopian Underworld." ↩

39. Mandisa Nyathi, “Ramaphosa Talks Tough on Illegal Mining,” *Mail and Guardian*, September 3, 2023, https://mg.co.za/politics/2023-09-03-ramaphosa-talks-tough-on-illegal-mining < https://mg.co.za/politics/2023-09-03-ramaphosa-talks-tough-on-illegal-mining> . ↩

40. Eyewitness News, “'Zama Zamas are just people': How a Mine in KZN Started Working with Illegal Miners,” *YouTube*, July 24, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BoN7lXbynes < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BoN7lXbynes> . ↩

41. Felix Todd, “The Plight of the Zama Zamas: A Perilous Hunt for Gold in South Africa’s Abandoned Mining Network,” *NS Energy*, September 18, 2019, https://www.nsenergybusiness.com/features/zama-zama-gold-south-africa/ < https://www.nsenergybusiness.com/features/zama-zama-gold-south-africa/> . ↩

42. For examples of some of this theorization in relation to particular performance examples, see Katia Arfara, “A Museum of Human Hunting: Thomas Bellinck’s Speculative Documentary,” *Theatre Journal* 75, no. 3 (2023): 277–99; Emma Cox, “Unsanctioned Refugee Processing: Maritime Interception, Aesthetics, Hospitality,” *Theatre Journal* 75, no. 3 (2023): 259–75; Jennifer M. Gully and Lynn Mie Itagaki, “Fleeing Bodies and Fleeting Performances: Transience and the Nation-State,” *Cultural Dynamics* 33, no. 1–2 (2021): 124–39; and Sean Metzger, “Concerning the Queer Refugee: Staceyann Chin’s Transient Performance,” *Cultural Dynamics* 33, no. 1–2 (2021): 29–44. ↩

Author Information

Sean Metzger

Sean Metzger is a professor in the UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television. He is the author of *Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance, Race* (2014) and *The Chinese Atlantic: Seascapes and the Theatricality of Globalization* (2020), both from Indiana University Press. The latter won awards from the American Theatre and Drama Society and the Association for Asian American Studies. The co-editor of *Theatre Journal* (2020–23), he has co-edited several special issues of journals—*Cultural Dynamics* (2009 and 2020), *Third Text* (2014), and *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas* (2019)—and several books, including *Embodying Asian/American Sexualities* (Lexington, 2009); *Futures of Chinese Cinema: Technologies and Temporalities in Chinese Screen Cultures* (Intellect, 2009); and *Awkward Stages: Plays about Growing Up Gay* (Cambria, 2015). He

was the president of Performance Studies international from 2016–20.

View all of Sean Metzger's articles.

Article details

Sean Metzger, "Racial Capitalism, Refugee Adjudication, and the Performances of Zama Zama," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.8

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

"A Currency of Happenstance"

by Louise Owen | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024), Political Economy and the Arts

ABSTRACT Commissioned by Manchester International Festival, *The Find* (2023) was a participatory art project by conceptual artist Ryan Gander. It distributed non-monetary coin in public space to create what Gander termed "a currency of happenstance," engaging chance procedures and choice. This essay discusses *The Find's* participatory aesthetics and ethical claims, asking what its engagement with coin might elucidate regarding continuities and changes in cultural and economic life, and contemporary political struggles regarding money.

KEYWORDS currency, performance, public art, self-help

This essay considers contemporary artist Ryan Gander's *The Find* (2023), a participatory art project distributing non-monetary coin in public space to create "a currency of happenstance"[1] engaging chance procedures and choice. Produced by Factory International, it was programmed as part of Manchester International Festival alongside another of its key solo artist commissions, Yayoi Kusama's *You, Me and the Balloons* (2023), an exhibition exuberantly received by critic Jonathan Jones as a "fantasy version of [Andy] Warhol's New York"[2] as if seen through the eyes of famed Manchester club-owner and record producer Tony Wilson. In its own cultural allusions, *The Find* similarly resonated with Wilson's legacy. Wilson named the Haçienda, his fabled club which operated for fifteen years between 1982 and 1997, after "a Situationist text that envisioned a space devoted to pleasure, a refuge against the consumer society."[3] In 2023, *The Find* used non-monetary coin as the prompt for a Situationist *dérive* in public space, a challenge to consumerism, and a coin flip game to enable a kind of

theatrical distanciation from the everyday. Between Thursday, June 29 and Sunday, July 16, festival volunteers dropped 200,000 silver coins in three designs, each about the size of a 10p piece, at thirteen locations across Greater Manchester. Half of these locations were in the city itself, and others further afield, from Wythenshawe Park to Broadfield Park in Rochdale. As the festival had it, the coins were not "your bog-standard copper coins – they're collectable artworks, lucky charms and decision-making tools rolled into one."[4] The project's title referred both to (the pleasure of) the chance discovery of the coins, and to the personal discoveries that might be made in flipping them—the choices they might generate being "PAUSE / ACTION," "SOLO / TOGETHER," or "Just LISTEN / SPEAK."

Ryan Gander is an extraordinarily prolific, award-winning contemporary artist of international renown, and recipient of an Order of the British Empire award for services to contemporary arts. Elected as a Royal Academician in 2021, his biography notes that his multi-form artworks engage "a questioning of language and knowledge, a reinvention of the modes of appearance and creation of an artwork."[5] More than that:

> His work can be reminiscent of a puzzle, a network with multiple connections, the fragments of an embedded story, a huge set of hidden clues to be deciphered, encouraging viewers to make their own connections and invent their own narrative in order to solve the charade with its many solutions, staged by the artist.[6]

The Find's action was exemplary of this narrative modality. But with decision-making at its heart, the project also resonated with a discourse of self-help—ubiquitous in the realm of financial advice on offer from charities and statutory and financial institutions responding to the cost-of-living crisis.[7] For many people in the context of the cost-of-living crisis, tactical adjustments to spending behaviours are insufficient to address even basic needs. As Frances Ryan glosses a 2023 Joseph Rowntree Foundation report accounting for the radical rise of

destitution in the UK, a condition now affecting 3.8 million people, "a decade of austerity and squeezed wages and benefits has ripped the social fabric, making large swathes of the population poorer, sicker and more insecure."[8] In this light, we might initially query the formal approach of *The Find*. It seems to present coin as a device to address "wellbeing in private terms, as a goal that is achievable through the adjustment of habits and patterns"[9]—as Marcus Verhagen critiques various texts exploring "slowing down" amid cultural and economic acceleration. To circulate 200,000 coins which resemble money that might be spent, but which instead invite their finders to consider whether to "pause/take action," and so on, might in one sense be interpreted as injudicious.

Tonally and contextually the artwork is vulnerable to such an interpretation—one that also threatens to return us to jaded debates about the nature of art, and in turn how resources are deployed to create it. Keeping this tension in view, I argue here that *The Find* also suggests larger questions about the modern monetary system. The artwork took an aestheticizing, defamiliarizing approach to coin, thereby staging it as both an instrument of exchange and a social question. The cache of coins was circulated specifically in Manchester—"a city that was at the centre of the industrial revolution, and that shaped global capitalism in the 19th century."[10] As Emily Gilbert and Eric Helleiner show, the nineteenth century was also the moment in which standardized national currencies gradually superseded a "chaotic monetary situation" consisting of numerous privately and publicly produced currencies accessible both as coins and notes.[11] Demands were made on the part of the poorest citizens for "'small denomination' money" to enable access to national economic participation.[12] In the contemporary, access to cash is also an object of political contention, but now in the context of the digital. With these historical aspects in mind, I discuss *The Find*'s participatory aesthetics and ethical claims, asking what its engagement with coin might elucidate regarding continuities and changes in cultural and economic life, and contemporary struggles regarding money.

I participated in *The Find* with a friend who lives in Manchester and her young child on Saturday, July 8, 2023. Having gathered at Piccadilly Station on a humid but dull day, we embarked on the walk into the city's streets. The vague destination of our wandering was Aviva Studios and Festival Square, the base of Manchester International Festival, where we imagined some coins might be seen. We strolled and talked, catching up after a few months of not seeing one another. The temperature suggested the prospect of rain. As the walk slowly unfolded, my attention to the streets around began to shift, and I became increasingly preoccupied with successfully finding the coins. My focus on our conversation became distracted by the possibility that they were lurking somewhere about, their potential presence indicated by the flash of metal in the light. My eyes scanned pavements, the surfaces of walls, and nooks and crannies embedded in buildings as we talked. My gaze gradually became more attuned to the streets' spatial geometry and material textures. I noticed the arrangement of grids of paving stones, the roughness of road surfaces, and bricks which had crumbled away slightly. I became more conscious of the heights of buildings, the grey of the surrounding sky. Rightly or wrongly, I felt a sense that the streets we were walking through, despite their location in the city centre, were peripheral—by virtue of the absence of shops, the presence of the occasional metal fence. No coins yet.

On Lever Street—a street in the Northern Quarter named after one of Manchester's nineteenth-century industrial families—we encountered a large poster relating to the artwork in a frame behind glass. The sheen of the glass over the poster's black backdrop reflected us like a mirror. An image of one of the coins floated upon it at a slightly oblique angle, with a phrase above: "Looking for change?" Amid the black, the silver coin gleamed. The image carefully picked out the texture of its ridged edges and ornate internal rim. Pitched somewhere between photograph and photorealistic painting, the image possessed a magical aspect. In the middle of the coin was its instruction: "Just… LISTEN." More words ran around the edge of the coin, though here it was impossible to make them out: they were "Your silence is louder than their raised voice." (The reverse of this coin

was not shown by the poster: “SPEAK,” embedded in a series of embossed quotation marks, encircled by a cryptic descriptive pairing: “Panoramic Vision * Panoramic Voice.”) A hashtag at the foot of the poster—#TheFindMCR—stitched the material search for coins into the digital realm. Though simple in its design, the poster’s statement was complex. On one level, its question related to the treasure hunt of the artwork, to which we could respond: yes, we are indeed looking for change on the streets of Manchester. The poster thus served as confirmation that we were on the right track, and as an ad for the artwork for those that might not yet be aware of it. On a metaphorical level, it presented a kind of decentring call and response to its audience: “Looking for change? Just listen.” It did not presume that the audience of this artwork was interested in change, nor specify what the change in question might be, nor even insist that change was necessary. It projected one person listening to another, or to wider social currents, or, in a surreal register, for the tinkling sound of metal somewhere in the vicinity, as if the coins might be alerting an audience audibly to their presence. Perhaps amenable to collective decision-making processes, the coins primarily imagined an individual subject.

We continued to walk. I said something about how *The Find* was making me think about what it must be like to scour the streets habitually for things that might be useful or of value to the seeker. The image I had in my mind was one of impoverishment: of looking for items lost or casually dropped by others on the ground such as money, or partially smoked cigarettes. From this standpoint, the city’s streets seemed an unforgiving scene of barriers and blocks where useful or desirable resources might manifest themselves at random. My friend agreed, and reflected upon how parenting had made her scrutinize public pathways in a much more vigilant manner, but from the point of view of whether or not objects that lay about were safe for her child to pick up. She added, “and, in a totally different category of experience, also Pokémon.” I thought about how, as reported on the *Off Menu* podcast a few weeks before, the comedians James Acaster, Sikisa, and Helen Bauer participate in their own hunting “crew” for Pokémon Go—an

augmented reality game in which individual players collect and interact with digital Pokémon on real streets via an app.[13] We arrived at Market Street and its imposing Victorian stone buildings. The literalism of street names in the City of London came to my mind—Milk Street, Bread Street, Poultry—their historical derivation, their sculpting of the social world and its priorities. We approached the grand edifice of the Royal Exchange. A sign attached to the building—formerly used for commodities trading, now a ritzy shopping arcade adjacent to one of Manchester's significant theatre buildings—revealed that it was bordered by Old Market Street, Bank Street, St. Ann's Square, and Cross Street. Rising up beyond St. Ann's Square was the extraordinary spectacle of Barton's Arcade, a metal construction reminiscent of the design of the Crystal Palace which housed the 1851 Great Exhibition, sandwiched uncannily between larger buildings on either side.[14] No coins here either.

We took a moment on a bench near to the Royal Exchange Theatre for a snack and a rest, before heading to Festival Square on Water Street, where a lunchtime gig for children was in full swing. On a covered stage, illuminated by blue lights, a jazz singer was belting out an adapted version of "Blue Suede Shoes" to which the dancing children were invited to suggest lyrics. By now it had started to rain a little bit. I left my friend and her child to dance and wandered out beyond the covered area to see if I could find any coins—scrutinizing benches and the areas adjacent to the food trucks. My heightened apperception of the shape of the landscape had waned, replaced with a vague sense of disappointment accentuated by the dismal drizzle. I rejoined them. Having listened to a couple more numbers from the singer and her band, we decided to head on to the Whitworth Gallery, where Tino Sehgal's performance *This entry* (2023) was in progress, alongside a group exhibition, *Economics the Blockbuster: It's Not Business as Usual* (2023). Like *The Find*, both works were programmed within the Manchester International Festival, and both were free of charge. Upon arriving at the gallery's entrance, a mild adrenaline rush spiked in me as I wondered whether any coins had been deposited there. If there had been, we didn't find them.

The Find introduced its beautifully designed coins into public circulation to propose that, as Ryan Gander put it in an interview at the launch of Manchester International Festival, "money isn't our greatest value."[15] It also intended to question how, under the conditions of consumerism, "we're all obsessed with things"—while at the same noting the cultural associations between finding money and luck, and quite rightly contending of the artwork's enticing coins that "you'd be a fool not to pick one of these up."[16] Neither the artwork nor commentary on it by critics or local journalists made any reference to the cost-of-living crisis—although Gander's observation in that interview that "you can't buy anything in Britain for a coin now"[17] hinted at inflation. Instead, in formal terms, it joined a long tradition of the use of coins for non-monetary discursive purposes. Examples on display at the Bank of England Museum include the "Middlesex halfpenny local token, 1700s," a coin "advertising a show at the Lyceum Theatre at the Strand in London," and "Spence's Plan token, 1813," embossed with the legend "'NO LANDLORDS / YOU FOOLS / SPENCE'S PLAN / FOREVER' [...] a political message to spread in favour of what Thomas Spence termed the 'communalisation' of all landed property."[18] In strong contrast to this nineteenth century demand, *The Find*'s moral economy focused on shifts to individual thought and practice which may or may not then open out to wider collective effects. In these terms, Gander framed the work's conceptual position like this: "we should experience our life in terms of value, in moments, and conversations, and ephemeral things, and memories, creating history."[19]

At the heart of *The Find*'s vision was thus an encouragement of a gentle rebellion against routine wherein the fulfilment of basic needs was imagined as already given. "Value" in this context connoted prioritising the intricacies and unpredictability of lived experience. Implicitly contrasted is time measured—as Marcus Verhagen glosses capitalist modernity's construction of it—as "an abstract and universal medium, like money," of time as an entity "understood in quantitative rather than qualitative terms."[20] That is to say, in its commitment to the ephemeral and the aleatory, the artwork counterposed time as measured and

measurable (“clock time”) with a non-measurable experience of time—and used money tokens as the contradictory means of actualising it. In its approach to public space and its refunctioning of coin, the artwork sought to obviate exchange value and prioritize use. The decision-making game itself was conceived by its creator as a method which “helps with agency or helps disrupt the monotony, or that kind of order, structural order that we’re all stuck in that we could escape quite easily, but we never remind ourselves to escape it,”[21] implicitly positioning the work as an heir of Situationism. Gander also spoke of *The Find*’s public offering as a democratising gesture: “to be part of a project and then to find out it was an *art* project—it kind of destigmatizes contemporary art, which needs to happen, because traditionally it’s been for the elite few, and we need to get rid of that completely.”[22]

The next morning, I returned to London. Later that day, my friend sent me some public Instagram posts she had seen about *The Find*. One shared on June 30 featured three images: a massive hoard of collected coins, a billboard with ten identical posters on a dark teal background featuring the text “Your choice” and the coin inscribed “PAUSE,” and the various coins now arranged in stacks. The caption read “Jackpot #TheFindMCR I will be sharing this. Soooo addictive finding them. Most found in NQ, some around Manchester Art Gallery, mainly not being noticed!” A subsequent post by the same author, dated July 9, catalogued various locations around Salford Quays about three miles from Manchester city centre at which they placed some of the coins. They posted: “Redistributing some of the wealth around Salford Quays this morning. #TheFindMCR @ryanjgander Love the fact that this is a piece of art you can engage with, even if you don’t know it’s happening, simply by finding a coin”—a reflection that resonated with the artist’s own aspirations for the work. The images showed the coins resting unassumingly on walls, picnic tables, granite blocks, paving slabs, and metal planters. In these settings they looked small, camouflaged slightly, like insects, or frogs in ponds. Another post by someone else, shared on July 1, had a sequence of close-ups of the coins on the top of fences, grates, and the ground; this person had chosen

not to collect and redistribute the coins herself, but to leave any of the sort she already had where she found them. Seeing these posts graced with so many shiny coins, now hundreds of miles away, made them seem even more desirable in my eyes. My friend planned to take her child to the park the next day to look for them again.

Approaching *The Find* in terms of redistribution, as these participants did, revealed that the meanings of the work exceeded the processes of movement it initiated in urban space, or the alternative ways in which the coins might encourage a person to direct their own life—that is to say, their micro-economic, self-help characteristics. By virtue of "minting"[23] and publicly issuing coin as an artistic device the project was also, intentionally or otherwise, a comment on the forms in which money is now made available and the manner in which it circulates or is accumulated. On the way back to London, I read a couple of chapters of Brett Scott's *Cloud Money* (2022), which explores the politics of "the automation of global finance, a process that first requires the physical money in our wallets to be replaced by digital money controlled by the banking sector—a scenario euphemistically called 'the cashless society.'"[24] In light of Scott's account, *The Find*'s local circulation of aestheticized, non-monetary coin took on another character. From the standpoint of the "cashless society" as "aspirational digital modernity"[25]—a narrative that *Cloud Money* strongly contests—*The Find*'s chosen object appears nostalgic, inconvenient, an antiquated form not long for this world. But it looks quite different from the standpoint of cash as a monetary technology that is not imbricated in digital networks, is accessible without recourse to cards or electronic devices, and which enables more immediate control over personal transactions.

And while it did not explicitly engage with this issue, the project took place in a scenario of political contention over the future of cash in the UK, relative to the cost-of-living crisis and to what is termed the "digital divide"[26] within the larger global context of the capitalist system and escalating economic inequality. In

March 2023, for example, two petitions were debated in the House of Commons under the heading "Cash Acceptance": their key calls were to, "'[m]ake it illegal for retailers and services to decline cash payments', and to: '[r]equire all businesses and public services to accept cash payments', with the exception of internet-based businesses."[27] In September 2023, a *Financial Times* piece reported that "[c]ash payments increased in the UK for the first time in a decade last year, driven by a post-pandemic rebound, economic uncertainty and the cost of living crisis," while also noting that "more than 600 banks [were] due to close by the end of 2023, leaving about 4,000 across the UK"[28]—a story demonstrating the entrenchment of the banking sector's withdrawal of in-person services in favour of the digital, despite rising public demand for cash. Beyond its focus on individual wellbeing, in choosing to circulate coin in the public sphere, *The Find*'s action might be interpreted as a refusal of the "claim that a cashless society is inevitable."[29] However, in that very action, the artwork also staged money much as it is conventionally imagined in terms of a "safe-deposit box": as a limited resource, fundamentally material in nature, to which access is predicated on competition and luck.[30]

Interpreted in context, this project might be seen as an aspect of an historical moment described by Adam Tooze as a monetary "interregnum": one of renewed political critique and attention to the politics of money, following global economic crises revealing "neoliberalism's ultimately doomed effort to depoliticize money."[31] That is to say, these crises have thrown into question the notion that money is "neutral or a veil over the 'real' activities of the economy (trade, exchange, the use of land and labour)."[32] *The Find*'s action was ambivalent and often contradictory—of necessity, given its chosen object. Its critique of the social prioritization of things was staged through the distribution of a large but limited quantity of fine objects—and indeed Gander reflected that the total number of coins the project made and distributed was determined by "'cost of the metals and the exchange rates.'"[33] Its creator framed "time and agency and attention" as precious and monetizable, and social media as an industry that accordingly seeks to "steal"

time.[34] Nonetheless, the project generated a volume of social media posts—some on what was then called Twitter, but the majority on the image-driven platform of Instagram—and it was these that afforded the project its sense of collective undertaking.

The coins' aesthetically realist resemblance to 10p pieces and their status as limited editions put them in ethical proximity with "real" money in other, perhaps unanticipated ways. Gander reflected upon festival volunteers distributing instalments of coin around the city: "it's really interesting how honest people are: people go chasing afterwards and giving them the money, that has happened, but there's also—they get handed in to security people and police, which is weird."[35] This reaction to the coins on the part of people unaware of the project bespeaks the status of money as an entity engaged, as Nigel Dodd argues, with "power, freedom, justice, and law," and underpinned along with these aspects by a "nexus of mutual obligation."[36] And in using coin to initiate movement in the city and critical reflection on everyday action, despite its presentation of money as a concrete and limited resource, the work arguably also spoke to this fundamental conceptual understanding: that in capitalism, money is "the real manifestation of 'abstract time.'"[37]

Having failed to find any coins in Manchester in July, I was finally able to get my hands on some in November by buying them on eBay.[38] Individual and full sets of the coins were then available from a number of sellers. As I finished this article in December, just two eBayers had the coins on sale—one selling individual coins on a "buy it now" and auction basis, and another selling multiple full sets. My own set was dispatched from a seller in Manchester. They cost £5 plus £4.50 postage, a sum I paid via PayPal, and arrived sellotaped to a Christmas card. Receiving them, I was transported to Christmases past, and the memory of gifts of pound coins from grandparents sent via the post. The coins were smaller and lighter than I expected, but the intricacy of their designs was bewitching, with more and more details revealing themselves with every look. At the point of purchase, I had

looked at the various sellers' other items. One was retailing hundreds of other items of clothing and household objects, indicating that the account was likely to be a small business; another carried a small selection of second-hand art books, suggesting the seller to be an enthusiast of art and culture. The seller I purchased from had only one other object on sale—a new Just Eat branded jacket, manufactured for the food delivery company's couriers.[39] The non-monetary coins were here marketed as saleable commodities by virtue of their status as art; the jacket, on sale for a much lower sum than its recommended retail price, was an avatar of the insecure gig economy. A marketplace setting in which multiple ideas and practices—of art, branding, bargain-hunting, peer-to-peer commerce, and digital payment—coincided, the juxtaposition of these items on eBay evinced a vision of contemporary decision-making conditioned not by the meditative exercise of choice in the mode of self-help, but of economic necessity.

Notes

1. Tim Adams, "Ryan Gander: 'Going to a Gallery As Like Taking Your Imagination to the Gym,'" *The Guardian*, June 18, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/jun/18/ryan-gander-artist-the-find-manchester-international-festival < https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/jun/18/ryan-gander-artist-the-find-manchester-international-festival> .

2. Jonathan Jones, "Review: Yayoi Kusama: You, Me and the Balloons Review—A Psychedelic Pop-Art Garden of Earthly Delights," *The Guardian*, June 30, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/jun/30/yayoi-kusama-balloons-review-aviva-studios-manchester < https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/jun/30/yayoi-kusama-balloons-review-aviva-studios-manchester> .

3. Richard J. Williams, "Manchester after Engels," *Places Journal*, June 2020, https://doi.org./10.22269/200630 < https://doi.org./10.22269/200630> .

4. "Ryan Gander: The Find," *Factory International*, https://factoryinternational.org/whats-on/ryan-gander-the-find/ < https://factoryinternational.org/whats-on/ryan-gander-the-find/> .

5. "Ryan Gander RA (b. 1976)," *Royal Academy*, https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/name/ryan-gander-ra < https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/name/ryan-

gander-ra> .

6. Ibid.

7. To take a representative selection of examples: *Money Wellness*, https://www.moneywellness.com/ < https://www.moneywellness.com/> ; "Money Problems and Mental Wellbeing," *Money Helper*, https://www.moneyhelper.org.uk/en/everyday-money/credit/money-problems-and-poor-mental-wellbeing < https://www.moneyhelper.org.uk/en/everyday-money/credit/money-problems-and-poor-mental-wellbeing> ; "Financial Wellbeing," *NHS England*, https://www.england.nhs.uk/supporting-our-nhs-people/support-now/financial-support/ < https://www.england.nhs.uk/supporting-our-nhs-people/support-now/financial-support/> ; "The Link Between Money and Mental Health," *Mind*, https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/money-and-mental-health/the-link-between-money-and-mental-health/ < https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/money-and-mental-health/the-link-between-money-and-mental-health/> ; "Mental Health and Money Worries," *Mental Wellbeing Hampshire*, https://www.hants.gov.uk/socialcareandhealth/publichealth/mentalwellbeinghampshire/moneyanddebt < https://www.hants.gov.uk/socialcareandhealth/publichealth/mentalwellbeinghampshire/moneyanddebt> ; *The Money Charity*, https://themoneycharity.org.uk/ < https://themoneycharity.org.uk/> ; and "Money Wellness—What We Believe," *First Direct*, https://www.firstdirect.com/uncovered/who-we-are/money-wellness/ < https://www.firstdirect.com/uncovered/who-we-are/money-wellness/> . The work of the Money and Pensions Service—a UK government organization founded in 2019 via a financial services levy to support individuals and businesses—proceeds from this standpoint: "{F}inancial wellbeing is about feeling secure and in control. It's about making the most of your money from day to day, dealing with the unexpected, and being on track for a healthy financial future. In short: financially resilient, confident and empowered." "What Is Financial Wellbeing?," *Money & Pensions Service*, https://maps.org.uk/en/our-work/uk-strategy-for-financial-wellbeing/what-is-financial-wellbeing < https://maps.org.uk/en/our-work/uk-strategy-for-financial-wellbeing/what-is-financial-wellbeing> .

8. Frances Ryan, "The Tories Have Created A New Poverty—One So Deep and Vicious It Requires Victorian Vocabulary," *The Guardian*, October 24, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/24/tories-poverty-destitute-history-politics < https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/24/tories-poverty-destitute-history-politics> .

9. Marcus Verhagen, *Viewing Velocities: Time in Contemporary Art* (Verso, 2023), 4.

10. Williams, "Manchester after Engels."

11. Emily Gilbert and Eric Helleiner, 'Introduction—Nation-States and Money: Historical Contexts, Interdisciplinary Perspectives," in *Nation-States and Money: The Past, Present and Future of National Currencies*, ed. Emily Gilbert and Eric Helleiner (Routledge, 1999), 4.

12. Gilbert and Helleiner, "Introduction," 6. ↩

13. "Helen Bauer," *Off Menu with Ed Gamble and James Acaster*, ep. 192, May 16, 2023, https://shows.acast.com/offmenu/episodes/ep-192-helen-bauer < https://shows.acast.com/offmenu/episodes/ep-192-helen-bauer> . ↩

14. For a fascinating discussion of Barton Arcade, see Paul Dobraszczyk, "Civic Space? The Barton Arcade, Manchester," *rag-picking history*, April 1, 2011, https://dobraszczyk.wordpress.com/2011/04/01/civic-space-the-barton-arcade-manchester < https://dobraszczyk.wordpress.com/2011/04/01/civic-space-the-barton-arcade-manchester/> . ↩

15. Studio International, "Ryan Gander | The Find | Manchester International Festival 2023," *YouTube*, July 10, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0z3wNAt3W0 < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0z3wNAt3W0> . ↩

16. Ibid. ↩

17. Ibid. ↩

18. Any Spare Change?, an exhibit at the Bank of England Museum, visited November 28, 2023. ↩

19. Studio International, "Ryan Gander | The Find." ↩

20. Verhagen, *Viewing Velocities*, 7. ↩

21. Studio International, "Ryan Gander | The Find." ↩

22. Ibid. ↩

23. Adams, "Ryan Gander." ↩

24. Brett Scott, *Cloudmoney: Cash, Cards, Crypto and the War for Our Wallets* (HarperCollins, 2022), 2. ↩

25. Scott, *Cloudmoney*, 43. ↩

26. Paola Serafino, "Exploring the UK's Digital Divide," *Office for National Statistics*, March 4, 2019, https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04 < https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04> . ↩

27. "Cash Acceptance | Volume 730: debated on Monday 20 March 2023," *UK Parliament: Hansard*, March 20, 2023, https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-03-20/debates/187CA19F-E3A9-48B1-B40A-869CB673F4A1/CashAcceptance < https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-03-20/debates/187CA19F-E3A9-48B1-B40A-869CB673F4A1/CashAcceptance> . ↩

28. Siddharth Venkataramakrishnan, “UK Cash Use Grows for First Time in a Decade,” *Financial Times*, September 13, 2023, https://www.ft.com/content/6f60def7-9458-40d4-b3a6-50575ba1e080 < https://www.ft.com/content/6f60def7-9458-40d4-b3a6-50575ba1e080> .

29. Scott, *Cloudmoney*, 10.

30. Josh Ryan-Collins, Tony Greenham, Richard Werner, and Andrew Jackson, *Where Does Money Come From? A Guide to the UK Monetary and Banking System*, 2nd ed. (New Economics Foundation, 2012), 11.

31. Adam Tooze, “Chartbook Newsletter #15: Talking (and Reading) about Bitcoin,” *Chartbook*, March 3, 2021, https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-newsletter-15 < https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-newsletter-15> . Political theorist Stefan Eich draws on Tooze’s formulation in *The Currency of Politics: The Political Theory of Money from Aristotle to Keynes* (Princeton University Press, 2022).

32. Ryan-Collins, Greenham, Werner, and Jackson, *Where Does Money Come From?*, 139.

33. Adams, “Ryan Gander.”

34. Studio International, “Ryan Gander | The Find.”

35. Ibid.

36. Nigel Dodd, *The Social Life of Money* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 4.

37. George Tomlinson, “Book Reviews: Marx, Time, History,” *Historical Materialism*, https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/marx-time-history < https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/marx-time-history/> .

38. I am now the owner of two sets: my friend had also procured a set, and in December 2023 sent them to me as a Christmas gift.

39. Numerous other accounts on eBay retail these items, at prices ranging between £40 to £5. No information about the uniform is featured in the company’s guidance for couriers; one financial blogger notes that for Just Eat there “no uniform to purchase, however the company has guidelines about how their drivers should be presented.” “How Much Do Just Eat Drivers Get Paid?,” *ThriftyChap*, https://thriftychap.com/how-much-do-just-eat-drivers-get-paid/ < https://thriftychap.com/how-much-do-just-eat-drivers-get-paid/> .

Author Information

Louise Owen

Louise Owen is Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Performance at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London. Her research examines contemporary theatre and performance in terms of economic change and modes of governance. Her work has been published in various edited collections and in the journals *Performance Research*, *frakcija*, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, and *TDR*. Her book *Restaging the Future: Neoliberalization, Theatre, and Performance in Britain* (Northwestern University Press, 2024) was shortlisted for the ATHE Outstanding Book Award 2024 and the TaPRA David Bradby Monograph Prize 2024.

View all of Louise Owen's articles.

Article details

Louise Owen, "'A Currency of Happenstance'," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.9

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Young People's Self-Making in Neoliberal Capitalism: Challenges and Opportunities

by Stephen M. Butler and Nathaniel Coward | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024), Political Economy and the Arts

ABSTRACT This paper charts the development of young people's self-making in neoliberal capitalism, specifying relationships between their self-making and susceptibility to mental health difficulties as they make their way in neoliberal market society. While neoliberal capitalism provides young people with opportunities to pursue and experiment with diverse identities and ways of being in the world, it also structures their self-making opportunities, by which charting selfhood becomes fertile ground for internalizing mental health problems. Our paper argues that the cultural imperative on young people to attain social status and success in the competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life that inhabit neoliberal capitalism demands that they curate and commodify highly desirable forms of selfhood that can never quite be realized. Endlessly failing to satisfy the conditions of selfhood in neoliberal capitalism, exhausted by the injunction to be more than they have already achieved, young people are socialized into increasingly complex and pressurized neoliberal capitalist cultures which challenge their ability to fulfill both their extrinsic desires for status and identity enhancement and their intrinsic needs for relatedness, belongingness, and self-worth. To conclude our paper, we summarize our main arguments and make some recommendations for promoting a more beneficial relationship between young people and the culture of neoliberal capitalism.

KEYWORDS capitalism, identity, neoliberalism, self, self-optimization, youth

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, modern, market-based economies and their accompanying individualistic and extrinsically oriented value structures have spread throughout much of the world.[1] While it is perhaps a truism to state that children and young people's development will be shaped by the world in which they live, albeit in complex and diverse ways, relatively little consideration has been given to relationships between neoliberal capitalist cultures and young people's mental health and well-being. As documented by cultural psychologist Carl Ratner over a decade ago, capitalism and its variants had appeared in only 14 article abstracts in all major psychology journals combined in the preceding 119 years.[2] He concluded that, "nobody is talking about the fact that nobody is talking about capitalism." In the decade since Ratner's observations, there has been a growing literature on the impact of neoliberal market economies on human development in the social sciences.[3] However, this literature is only starting to emerge in relation to mental health and well-being,[4] and typically does not consider links between young people's mental health and their strivings to find a place in the highly competitive and achievement-oriented neoliberal capitalist cultures in which they live.

Neoliberal capitalism promotes self-interest and interpersonal styles rooted in competition, a strong desire for financial success, high levels of consumption, and belief in the necessity of economic growth.[5] It has been associated with the rise of extrinsic values such as individualism, materialism, and status-seeking, which have intensified over the last 40–50 years in consumer economies.[6] The dominance of extrinsic values is consequential: when young people show disproportionate extrinsic relative to intrinsic values there is increased risk for mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, and poorer well-being.[7]

Critically, as Ratner pointed out, capitalism disguises itself as a culture, with its emphasis on individualism and private ownership of resources obscuring its own

social organization and influences on human development. For example, in neoliberal capitalist cultures, young people's development and well-being occurs in differentiated and competitive social environments where opportunities and access to resources are unequally distributed,[8] and often stratified by region, race, ethnicity, gender, ability, and socio-economic differences.[9] These foundational inequalities are believed to be an inescapable part of capitalist social and cultural relations, leading to uneven life chances for many young people with consequences for their mental health and well-being.[10] Even when these social inequalities are brought to people's attention, empirical studies suggest that individuals who live in neoliberal capitalist cultures believe that its market-based system is inherently fair, legitimate, and just.[11]

In this text we understand performance as the performance of self in everyday life and consider the effects of neoliberal capitalism on such performance. Our analysis is focused on relationships between young people's self-making in complex modern market cultures and their mental health and well-being. In particular, we seek to understand the growing presence of internalizing difficulties (i.e., emotional problems tied to the self) in many young people's lives, namely experiences of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and low self-worth.[12] Epidemiological studies suggest that internalizing symptoms are relatively stable during childhood and increase during adolescence and young adulthood.[13] Internalizing difficulties create a substantial burden of suffering for young people, with a prevalence of 32% of anxiety disorders and 14.3% mood disorders in youth from 13 to 18 years old.[14] There is growing documentation and concern that internalizing problems in young people are on the rise,[15] especially in neoliberal capitalist countries.[16] In a relatively recent population-based study of Swedish youth spanning from 1981 to 2014, Blomqvist and colleagues (2019) report that both those identifying as girls and those identifying as boys showed increasing internalizing problems while conduct problems decreased.[17] This aligns with interdisciplinary research such as the theoretical work of Byung-Chul Han, which aptly describes our shift from a Foucauldian disciplinary society predicated on

prohibitions and commandments that can lead to delinquency and deviance for those who fail to fit in, to an achievement-society predicated on an excess of positivity that results in labels of “depressives and losers” for those that cannot compete and produce.[18] These converging findings, documenting increasing emotional difficulties and theorizing the pressures of living in the highly competitive and achievement-oriented environments, prompt us to consider links between the social organization of neoliberal capitalism and internalizing difficulties in young people.

Self-Making in Highly Competitive and Achievement-Oriented Forms of Life

To confront this trend of increasing internalizing problems, Blomqvist and colleagues suggest that we need a deeper understanding of the impact of the major societal changes of the past three decades on young people’s mental health and well-being.[19] We suggest that the commanding influence of extrinsic values in a highly competitive socio-economic context are linked to the reconfiguration of young people’s psychosocial and interpersonal processes, the use of technology, and the ambient socio-ecological conditions that inform their development and their self-making. Today, young people’s sense of self is developing in neoliberal capitalist cultures where accession to adulthood roles are delayed,[20] greater emphasis is placed on their ability to access higher education and/or job skills training,[21] families are smaller and subject to greater structural instability,[22] and the entertainment, fashion, and sporting industries have become important socializing influences.[23] Young people’s prolific use of technology, exemplified by social media, develops individualistic behaviors, attitudes, values, and self-focused aspirations such as garnering social recognition and fame.[24] Overall, the diminished normative structures and shifting socialization influences toward extrinsic values and metrics, exacerbated by greater social inequality and

uncertainty in the labor market, makes self-making more complex and the passage to a functional adulthood more precarious.[25]

Young people's self-making in the highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life is responsive to socio-ecologies of self-optimization. The notion of a *form of life* is adopted from the literature on affordances and embodied cognition, which is defined as "a set of behavioral patterns, relatively robust on socio-cultural and biographical time scales, which is characteristic of a group or population."[26] Young people's growing participation in unending status competitions and the pursuit of social success are integral to highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life.[27] *Self-optimization* may be defined as the acquisition and development of the skills, means, and resources necessary to enhance the probability of attaining social status and success.[28] In the socio-ecologies of neoliberal capitalism, young people become invested in their self-optimization and in the positional aspects of self-making, fostering their ability to establish their social standing and to develop socially and economically productive lives in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life.

With the dominance of modern market cultures globally, population studies reveal parental shifts toward greater investment in fewer children so parents can optimize their children's embodied capital (e.g., physical health, intelligence, knowledge and skills, social status, and networks) for them to compete successfully and achieve status.[29] The development of young people's self-optimization extends beyond parental investment to include a broader socio-ecology that is designed to invest in young people's embodied capital and therefore equip them to become productive and successful adults.[30] These broader social investments in young people's embodied capital are made by non-kin adults such as teachers, coaches, and counsellors, and social institutions such as school and governmental provisions in areas like education and healthcare that vary within and across Western nations.[31]

Young people's ability to benefit from socio-ecologies that support young people's self-optimization are crucial. That is, young people's capacity to participate in educational and extracurricular activities, to thrive in technologically mediated environments, and to obtain necessary parental and social support and resources are highly consequential in their pursuit of the skills and knowledge necessary for them to meet environmental demands and maximize their life chances in neoliberal capitalist cultures. As noted above, however, the possibility for young people to self-optimize is often constrained by their limited access to critical material and psychological resources in the unequally distributed political economy of neoliberal capitalist nations.

Young People's Mental Health in Highly Competitive and Achievement-Oriented Forms of Life

Beyond outlining the socio-cultural and socio-economic threads that help us understand the impact of neoliberal capitalism on young people's mental health, we take Blomqvist and colleagues' suggestions for a cultural analysis one step further. We propose that we need to understand the overarching ideology and socio-cultural forms and practices of neoliberal capitalism that inform young people's self-making and mental health. In neoliberal capitalism, young people are pressured to self-commodify and to serve and outperform their peers in the marketplaces that define their world. While we realize that there is substantial empirical evidence into the host of individual, parent-child, familial, and social factors that place young people at risk for internalizing mental health problems,[32] we adopt a cultural interdisciplinary analysis that is conceptual and borrows from research as necessary.

To inform our interdisciplinary cultural diagnosis of the rising rates of internalizing problems in young people, we draw on Dutch psychiatrist Jan Hendrik van den Berg's *sociosis*.[33] Van den Berg claims that vulnerabilities to certain mental health disorders and issues are tied to the relational and socio-cultural contexts of a given historical period. For example, he argues that Sigmund Freud's insistence that individual neuroses were all related to sexual concerns cannot be divorced from the repressed sexuality and rigorous social mores of the second half of nineteenth-century Western Europe. The subject of Freud's time was continually confronting the subconscious cultural discourses of sexuality that were foreclosed during the Victorian era in Western Europe.

We can look at differing conceptions of sexuality and their proposed links to mental health as an example of the relationship between social organization and mental health disorders. Freud details a conception of Victorian sexuality grounded in repressed desires located in a deep intrapsychic realm, hidden from the subject and discoverable only in a relationship with an analyst. However, sexuality in neoliberal capitalism is visible, commodified, and mostly discoverable by competitive peer audiences participating in highly competitive modern market economies. In contrast to Freud's time, we see in young people's self-making a prominent focus on physical attractiveness, sexuality, and appearance ideals, which have become metrics of social success and ciphers of social recognition and popularity. These changing social attitudes toward sexuality help mark a shift in the type of mental health disorders most common to a given society and how we come to understand them.

Following van den Berg's insight that mental health disorders are the result of the relationships and organization of society rather than neuroses responding to repressed sexuality, we hypothesize that young people's increasing proclivities towards internalizing disorders are, in significant ways, responses to the intensifying cultural demands and pressures of neoliberal capitalism. Young people's mental health in this politico-economic system can be fruitfully

understood by locating the development of their internalizing problems in a period of intensifying global competition[34] and to outperforming one's peers to secure material and psychological resources.[35] The result is that young people are coerced into unending pursuit of social status and success co-extensive with highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life.

Young people's injunction toward self-optimization in their pursuit of extrinsically grounded social status and success is evolutionarily based, stage-salient, and culturally promoted.[36] Occurring during adolescence and early adulthood, young people turn toward high-status peers and figures of cultural prestige, often from popular culture, to guide them in their quest to find an optimal place in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life. Unfortunately, these high-status attractors embody desirable but also curated and manufactured versions of extrinsic metrics of success largely unattainable by most young people. These metrics—physical attractiveness, high academic and extracurricular achievements, and displayed material success—have been termed market-driven criteria (MDC).[37] These status and identity-enhancing MDC have become integrated into social systems and function symbolically as individuals develop in complex market-based societies. For example, young people engage in status and identity-enhancing signaling of the MDC in competitive cultural environments such as on social media or in everyday interactions with their peers and others (e.g., young people posting acceptance letters from prestigious American colleges to signal elevated status).

Under intensifying competitive cultural pressures to develop optimal self-narratives of status, success, and self-image, young people may be prone to self-objectification, defining themselves from the outside-in, commensurate with extrinsic, quantifiable metrics (i.e., MDC). In turn, this objectified sense of self is often accompanied by judgmental peer social comparisons with adverse consequences for young people's mental health and well-being in offline and online contexts,[38] most likely via perceptions of subordinate status and

accompanying internalizing symptoms.[39] In the longer term, young people are left with limited and largely prescribed resources to help them develop a more accurate and positive self-image and subjectivity that incorporates awareness of their own growth and struggles (i.e., internal self-comparisons over time), and to accurately discover what they have to offer the world to meet environmental demands (i.e., more rounded self-objectification), in the hope of eventually fulfilling their intrinsic needs and living satisfying lives.

Qualitative accounts from young people themselves, and rigorous quantitative research, document unrelenting cultural pressures on young people to self-optimize in both their academic and extracurricular pursuits in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life.

These research studies indicate that the criteria and performances required of young people are moving toward very unhelpful and potentially harmful extremes. In qualitative studies of young people's experience of high achieving schools in Australia and highly competitive equestrian training programs in Sweden, adolescents' personal accounts describe competitive pressures to display identities encapsulated by the terms "*super girl*" and "*super equestrian*."[40] The *super girl* pursues entrance into an elite college as her ticket to elevated status and future wealth, while the *super equestrian* signals the most desirable online identity, namely a rider who is attractive, wears the "right clothes," is successful, and "acts professionally." These personal accounts from young people in Australia and Sweden correspond with broader linear increases in young adults' reports of culturally prescribed perfectionism (i.e., perceived strong social pressures and expectations to be perfect) from 1989 to 2016 found in the neoliberal economies of Canada, the US, and the UK.[41] We hypothesize that striking rises in socially prescribed perfectionism are likely related to the elevations in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and suicidality seen in these countries. Similar to the notion of highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life advanced here,

young people's internalizing problems are linked to rising pre-occupations with competition and status-attainment in the industrialized world.

Notwithstanding these concerning developments, we underline that capitalism's impact on young people's lives does not only result in negative effects. We are strongly influenced by Stiegler's elaboration of the notion of *pharmakon* in capitalism.[42] That is, young people's self-making in neoliberal capitalism provides both opportunities and adversities, advantages and disadvantages, that cannot be separated from one another, as *pharmaka* can be both poison and cure. As a broad stroke, capitalism has led to great prosperity since the Second World War and has been of substantial benefit to well-being, providing levels of personal and political freedom, as well as infrastructure, health, and social provisions unheard of throughout most of human history.[43] The centrality of status and identity-enhancement in neoliberal capitalism is highly appealing, allowing for constant innovation and incorporation of an ever-widening range of status distinctions and potential identities. Under certain conditions and *for some people*, capitalism accommodates growing and diverse skill sets to meet societal demands. Evolutionary sociologist John Hammond describes how neoliberal capitalism elaborates an appealing status inflation that has become part of market societies.[44] For example, in academia, faculty have a growing series of metrics to signal their academic status and worth to themselves, their employers, and academic peers: publications, publications in high versus low impact journals, the international profile of their publications, holding grants varying in monetary worth, as well as citations, h-index, i-index, etc. Thus, the growing population has fueled the expansion and variegation of status and identity distinctions, accommodating an increasing number of individuals and groups. Whether it is the power of the advertising industry to promote and shape identities grounded in consumer goods that embody cultural trends, values, and beliefs, or the affordances offered by social media for young people to form identities in present-focused environments that stress individualization and that foreground MDC, neoliberal capitalism offers a flexible, plastic space for self-making. For

example, there are indications that LGBTQ+ youth find a sense of self-worth and belongingness on social media that is not available to them within family and even peer contexts within their schools or local communities.[45]

Young People Self-Making on Social Media: Struggles for Balance

Young people's responses to the peer and cultural pressures living in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life can lead to engagement in unhelpful, harmful, and potentially destructive behaviours. Cultural trends encouraging young people to signal increasingly idealized or perfect embodiments of MDC follow a market logic of growth and competition, where performances of continuously improving, culturally promoted extrinsic metrics are necessary to continue securing recognition, belongingness, and self-worth.[46] Thus, as young people progressively strive to live productive and satisfying lives, they must negotiate the tension to balance their extrinsic market-driven strivings with fundamental intrinsic needs to feel worthy as human beings, to feel connected to others, and to believe that life is worth living.

The movement of young people's self-making toward extreme self-displays and self-performances is illustrated by their use of the technological and social affordances made available in the pharmacological space of social media. The pharmacological conception of social media (i.e., as a cultural space for either therapeutics or toxicities) is congruent with substantial empirical research documenting that patterns of associations between social media use and well-being in children and adolescents do not uphold mostly positive nor mostly negative effects, but rather underline the importance of how young people use social media as a space of self-performance, and how patterns of use and digital contexts inform mental health and well-being outcomes.[47]

Within this complex pharmacological setting, there is growing societal concern and effort to understand and address toxic and desperate acts such as online suicidality and self-harm.[48] These destructive online acts have been documented since the first ever live-streamed suicide by a young female named Océane, who displayed strong inclinations to achieve social recognition, if not online celebrity.[49] There is also the recent case of Eugenia Cooney, a social media influencer, whose online displays of anorexia nervosa have created a movement of "thinspiration" for her millions of followers across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.[50] In our individualistic capitalist culture, ego ideal fantasies driven by cultural imperatives seem to operate so strongly as to push people beyond the liminal realities of life and death.

To understand the tragic online experiences of Eugenia and Océane, we make use of ongoing theorizing that conceptualizes social media as a performance space. Incorporating the seminal ideas of Erving Goffman,[51] social media has been repeatedly framed as a stage[52] where performances transpire, and where, in performing, young people offer themselves up for critique. Online critiques from young people's performances can occur in sometimes dense and escalating feedback cycles that signal acceptance (e.g., likes) or rejection (negative or no response). By its very technological architecture, social media is a stage that solicits positive or negative critique from a highly expectant audience of peers. However, the difference between theatrical performances and Eugenia and Océane's performance-signaling on social media is that their characters inevitably collapse, and unavoidably become tied to who these young women actually are and were. Hence the mask becomes flesh. Young people's performances on social media cannot help but refer back to their embodied selves, full of longings, insecurities, and doubts, and complex feelings embedded in complex relationships. Unfortunately, the technologically mediated communicative space of social media is often deficient in its ability to capture, communicate, and converse around complex, nuanced, and ambiguous performances.

Conclusions

Young people's self-making in neoliberal capitalism reveals a distinct configuration of self, use of technology, and relationships to peer and broader culture environments. As we have described, young people are motivated by an incessant capitalist demand, a cultural superego, to achieve social status and success. Navigating competitive peer environments and cultural demands, young people leverage MDC in exploiting their talents and skills to garner social status and financial success. Pharmacologically speaking, neoliberal capitalism has been conceptualized as a highly appealing system where innovating societies require an increasing diversity of skills and potential identities from their populations.[53] On the other hand, young people are obliged to place their identities on the market, developing and performing self-narratives of success and enhanced self-image with MDC as their lingua franca. Young people's chances for finding status and success in neoliberal capitalism is greatly diminished if they do not play by the rules of the capitalist game. Unfortunately, the game comes with two rules. First, young players do not all start on the same square; that is, access to resources and opportunities are unequally distributed and are often stratified based on region, race, ethnicity, gender, ability, and socio-economic differences.[54] Second, one must continually try to win at the game, even to the point of exhaustion and even if the game is rigged. As sung by Uncle Tupelo, "You can't break even, you can't even quit the game."[55]

Self-making in neoliberal capitalism presents young people with opportunities but also challenges and adversities through which they seek to develop financially productive and emotionally satisfying lives. To return to the beginning, van den Berg himself noted that while the factors of a specific social organization and historical epoch affect everyone, only a limited number of people will show mental health symptoms and disorder.[56] Research to date suggests that young people's susceptibility to cultural imperatives to achieve status and social success via

signaling of status-driven MDC, and thus susceptibility to greater risk for internalizing difficulties, is influenced by the degree to which they are invested in these metrics, perceive that they must conform to peer and cultural pressures to perform them, or show a relatively unintegrated self-concept more susceptible to cultural capitalist demands.[57]

As pithily expressed by Han, the new commandment of late-modern societies is the imperative to achieve.[58] We have documented that young people perceive enormous cultural pressures and expectations on themselves and their peers to perform at the highest level of achievements in their academic and extra-curricular pursuits, embodied by the term "super selves." Qualitative and quantitative research document that the current demands of highly competitive and unequal capitalist cultures on young people are often unrelenting and increasingly seem unachievable. Young people must self-optimize in order to develop narratives of success and find their place in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life. It is crucial to recognize that young people's self-optimization extends beyond the individual young person to their parents and families, schools, and the broader cultural field. Consequently, their self-optimization is embedded in both the provision and stratification of resources that facilitate and constrain human flourishing such as education, health, and mental health services. Convincing empirical data suggests that higher degrees of social inequality are associated with poorer mental health and well-being outcomes, which manifest across the socio-economic spectrum.[59]

As young people strive to self-optimize and fulfill the insistent demands of highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life, accumulating data suggests that the intense pressures to display status and achieve social success place some young people at risk for internalizing mental health problems. Young people's tendencies to engage in judgmental social comparisons in competitive environments,[60] and tendencies to endorse disproportionate investment in

extrinsic compared to intrinsic goals and values,[61] are two mechanisms by which these cultural pressures and demands translate into internalizing problems.

At the same time, we remain hopeful that young people have the capacities and can develop the knowledge and skills to negotiate and reckon with the pressures and potential toxic effects of neoliberal capitalism. To promote therapeutics as opposed to toxicities, what may be helpful now is to help young people face the challenges of evolving subjectivities that remain responsive to, and constrained *but not subsumed by*, predominant cultural values, norms, and expectations. This form of engagement in their own self-making can be a hopeful process that provides young people and their culture with opportunities to facilitate their mental health and well-being, i.e., to foster adaptive person-socio-ecology fits.

Young people developing in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life require guidance and signposts. Scaffolding must be provided by the relationships and institutions of which they are part, namely families and education, health, artistic, athletic, and mental health systems.

As young people apply their increasingly sophisticated socio-cognitive skills and growing agency to facilitate person-ecology fits, cultural institutions bear equal responsibility to support this process. These cultural spaces must host interpersonal and socio-cultural factors that promote young people's well-being in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life. Specifically, these cultural spaces must be protected from insistent pressures toward optimal and perfect self-making, the stigmatizing of diversities and mental health issues, and the pressures of poverty and intensifying social and economic inequalities.

Finally, it is incumbent on psychology and related disciplines involved in addressing young people's mental health and well-being to recognize and act on the cultural and interpersonal toxicities that may accompany neoliberal capitalism. We would call attention to the intensive competition and individualization that structure young people's relations to others, and, in a highly problematic turn, the

relationship that one develops with oneself. In other words, the paradox is that there is market-mediated competition between people over the relationships that they get to have with themselves as products in the marketplace. Despite a seemingly continual discourse on personal freedom in neoliberal capitalism, young people's relationships with themselves are predicated on their social standing in relation to how they are valued by others and their possession of the currency (i.e., MDC) that defines successful selves in neoliberal capitalism. Unfortunately, in the mental health disciplines as in the broader culture, the individual is revered while the underlying condition for mental health issues—the culture of individualism and competition which define self-making in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life—is largely ignored. From our vantage point, and until a better politico-economic system addresses the problem at its core, addressing rising internalizing disorders in young people requires attention to their overbearing fear that failure to compete and to succeed is a failure of self and to oneself.

Notes

1. Patricia M. Greenfield, "Linking Social Change and Developmental Change: Shifting Pathways of Human Development," *Developmental Psychology* 45, no. 2 (2009): 401, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014726; Helen V. Milner and Bumba Mukherjee. "Democratization and Economic Globalization," *Annual Review of Political Science* 12 (2009): 163–81, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.12.110507.114722; and Henri C. Santos, Michael E. W. Varnum, and Igor Grossmann. "Global Increases in Individualism," *Psychological Science* 28, no. 9 (2017): 1228–39, https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617700622 < https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617700622> .

2. Carl Ratner, *Macro Cultural Psychology: A Political Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

3. Thomas Teo, "*Homo neoliberalus*: From Personality to Forms of Subjectivity," *Theory & Psychology* 28, no. 5 (2018): 581–99, https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354318794899; and Ulrich Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self: Fabricating a New Type of Subject* (SAGE Publications, 2015), https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473921283 < https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473921283> .

4. James Davies, *Sedated: How Modern Capitalism Created Our Mental Health Crisis* (Atlantic Books, 2021); and Sheri Laliberte and Colleen Varcoe, "The Contradictions between Canadian Capitalist Processes and Youth Mental Health: Implications for Mental Health Promotion," *Health Promotion International* 36, no. 1 (2021): 250-–61, https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daz073 < https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daz073> .

5. Tim Kasser, Steve Cohn, Allen D. Kanner, and Richard M. Ryan, "Some Costs of American Corporate Capitalism: A Psychological Exploration of Value and Goal Conflicts," *Psychological Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (2007): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/10478400701386579 < https://doi.org/10.1080/10478400701386579> .

6. Jean M. Twenge, Stacy M. Campbell, Brian J. Hoffman, and Charles E. Lance, "Generational Differences in Work Values: Leisure and Extrinsic Values Increasing, Social and Intrinsic Values Decreasing," *Journal of Management* 36, no. 5 (2010): 1117–42, https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206309352246 < https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206309352246> .

7. Helga Dittmar, Rod Bond, Megan Hurst, and Tim Kasser, "The Relationship between Materialism and Personal Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 107, no. 5 (2014): 879, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037409; and Anja Van Den Broeck, Bert Schreurs, Karin Proost, Arne Vanderstukken, and Maarten Vansteenkiste. "I Want to Be a Billionaire: How Do Extrinsic and Intrinsic Values Influence Youngsters' Well-Being?," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 682, no. 1 (2019): 204–19, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716219831658 < https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716219831658> .

8. Richard G. Wilkinson and Kate E. Pickett, "Income Inequality and Social Dysfunction," *Annual Review of Sociology* 35 (2009): 493–511, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-115926 < https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-115926> .

9. Carol M. Worthman and Kathy Trang, "Dynamics of Body Time, Social Time and Life History at Adolescence," *Nature* 554, no. 7963 (2018): 451–57, https://doi.org/10.1038/nature25750 < https://doi.org/10.1038/nature25750> .

10. Dittmar et al., "The Relationship between Materialism"; Van Den Broeck et al., "I Want to Be a Billionaire"; and Worthman and Trang, "Dynamics of Body Time."

11. Aleksandra Cichocka and John T. Jost, "Stripped of Illusions? Exploring System Justification Processes in Capitalist and Post-Communist Societies," *International Journal of Psychology* 49, no. 1 (2014): 6–29, https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12011 < https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12011> ; and John T. Jost, Sally Blount, Jeffrey Pfeffer, and György Hunyady, "Fair Market Ideology: Its Cognitive-Motivational Underpinnings," *Research in Organizational Behavior* 25 (2003): 53–91, https://doi.org/10.1016/s0191-3085(03)25002-4 < https://doi.org/10.1016/s0191-3085(03)25002-4> .

12. Colleen S. Conley, Lori M. Hilt, and Carol Hundert Gonzales, "Internalizing in Adolescents and Young Adults," in *APA Handbook of Adolescent and Young Adult*

Development, ed. L. J. Crockett, G. Carlo, and J. E. Schulenberg (American Psychological Association, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1037/0000298-031 < https://doi.org/10.1037/0000298-031> .

13. Jean M. Twenge and Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, "Age, Gender, Race, Socioeconomic Status, and Birth Cohort Difference on the Children's Depression Inventory: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 111, no. 4 (2002): 578, https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-843x.111.4.578 < https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-843x.111.4.578> .

14. Kathleen Ries Merikangas, Jian-ping He, Marcy Burstein, Sonja A. Swanson, Shelli Avenevoli, Lihong Cui, Corina Benjet, Katholiki Georgiades, and Joel Swendsen, "Lifetime Prevalence of Mental Disorders in US Adolescents: Results from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication–Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A)," *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 49, no. 10 (2010): 980–89, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2010.05.017 < https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2010.05.017> .

15. Melanie S. Askari, Caroline G. Rutherford, Pia M. Mauro, Noah T. Kreski, and Katherine M.Keyes, "Structure and Trends of Externalizing and Internalizing Psychiatric Symptoms and Gender Differences among Adolescents in the US from 1991 to 2018," *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 57 (2022): 737–48, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-021-02189-4 < https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-021-02189-4> ; and Ida Blomqvist, Eva Henje Blom, Bruno Hägglöf, and Anne Hammarström, "Increase of Internalized Mental Health Symptoms among Adolescents during the Last Three Decades," *European Journal of Public Health* 29, no. 5 (2019): 925–31, https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckz028 < https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckz028> .

16. Stephan Collishaw, "Annual Research Review: Secular Trends in Child and Adolescent Mental Health," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 56, no. 3 (2015): 370–93, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12372 < https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12372> .

17. Blomqvist et al., "Increase of Internalized Mental Health Symptoms."

18. Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford University Press, 2015).

19. Blomqvist et al., "Increase of Internalized Mental Health Symptoms."

20. James E. Côté, "Youth-Identity Studies: History, Controversies and Future Directions," in *Routledge Handbook of Youth and Young Adulthood*, 2nd ed., ed. Andy Furlong (Routledge, 2017).

21. Wilkinson and Pickett, "Income Inequality and Social Dysfunction"; Christine Musselin, "New Forms of Competition in Higher Education," *Socio-Economic Review* 16, no. 3 (2018): 657–83, https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwy033 < https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwy033> ; and Rajani Naidoo, "The Competition Fetish in Higher Education: Varieties, Animators and Consequences," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37, no. 1 (2016): 1–10,

https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1116209 < https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1116209> .

22. Butler (2019) provides the empirical literature in support of greater structural instability. See Stephen Butler, "The Impact of Advanced Capitalism on Well-Being: An Evidence-Informed Model," *Human Arenas* 2, no. 2 (2019): 200–27, https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-018-0034-6 < https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-018-0034-6> .

23. Stephen Butler, "The Development of Market-Driven Identities in Young People: A Socio-Ecological Evolutionary Approach," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021): 623–75, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.623675 < https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.623675> .

24. Patricia M. Greenfield, "Social Change, Cultural Evolution, and Human Development," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 8 (2016): 84–92, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.10.012 < https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.10.012> .

25. Côté, "Youth-Identity Studies."

26. Butler, "The Development of Market-Driven Identities in Young People."

27. Maxwell J.D. Ramstead, Samuel P. L. Veissière, and Laurence J. Kirmayer, "Cultural Affordances: Scaffolding Local Worlds through Shared Intentionality and Regimes of Attention," *Frontiers in Psychology* 7 (2016): 1090, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01090 < https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01090> .

28. Paul B. Baltes, "On the Incomplete Architecture of Human Ontogeny: Selection, Optimization, and Compensation as Foundation of Developmental Theory," *American Psychologist* 52, no. 4 (1997): 366, https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.52.4.366 < https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.52.4.366> ; and Stephen Butler, "Young People on Social Media in a Globalized World: Self-Optimization in Highly Competitive and Achievement-Oriented Forms of Life," *Frontiers in Psychology* 15 (2024): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.13406055 < https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.13406055> .

29. Hillard S. Kaplan and Steven W. Gangestad, "Life History Theory and Evolutionary Psychology," in *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, ed. David M. Buss (Wiley & Sons, 2015); David W. Lawson and Ruth Mace, "Optimizing Modern Family Size: Trade-Offs between Fertility and the Economic Costs of Reproduction," *Human Nature* 21 (2010): 39–61, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12110-010-9080-6 < https://doi.org/10.1007/s12110-010-9080-6> ; and Mary K. Shenk, Hillard S. Kaplan, and Paul L. Hooper, "Status Competition, Inequality, and Fertility: Implications for the Demographic Transition," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 371, no. 1692 (2016): 20150150, https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2015.0150 < https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2015.0150> .

30. Jane B. Lancaster and Hillard S. Kaplan, "Embodied Capital and Extra-Somatic Wealth in Human Evolution and Human History," in *Human Evolutionary Biology*, ed. Michael P. Muehlenbein (Cambridge University Press, 2012), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511781193 < https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511781193> ; and Carol M. Worthman, "Inside-Out and Outside-In? Global Development Theory, Policy, and Youth," *Ethos* 39, no. 4 (2011): 432–51, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1352.2011.01211.x < https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1352.2011.01211.x> . ↩

31. Max Roser and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, "Literacy," *Our World in Data*, March 2024, https://ourworldindata.org/literacy < https://ourworldindata.org/literacy> ; and Eric C. Schneider, Arnav Shah, Michelle M. Doty, Roosa Tikkanen, Katharine Fields, and Reginald D. Williams II, "Mirror Mirror 2021: Reflecting Poorly: Health Care in the US Compared to Other High-Income Countries," *The Commonwealth Fund*, August 2021, https://www.commonwealthfund.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Schneider_Mirror_Mirror_2021.pdf < https://www.commonwealthfund.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Schneider_Mirror_Mirror_2021.pdf> . ↩

32. Conley et al. "Internalizing in Adolescents." ↩

33. Jan Hendrik Van den Berg, *The Changing Nature of Man: Introduction to a Historical Psychology* (W.W. Norton, 1961). ↩

34. Musselin, "New Forms of Competition"; and Naidoo, "The Competition Fetish." and an increasing prominence and sophistication of the extrinsic-value structures of consumer economies. In these consumer economies, subjective well-being is more likely to be linked to achieving and promoting one's status,[35. Douglas T. Kenrick and Jaimie Arona Krems, "Well-Being, Self-Actualization, and Fundamental Motives: An Evolutionary Perspective," in *Handbook of Well-Being*, ed. E. Diener, S. Oishi, and L. Tay (DEF Publishers, 2018), https://www.nobascholar.com < https://www.nobascholar.com> . ↩

35. Bo Winegard, Ben Winegard, and David C. Geary, "The Status Competition Model of Cultural Production," *Evolutionary Psychological Science* 4 (2018): 351–71, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40806-018-0147-7 < https://doi.org/10.1007/s40806-018-0147-7> . ↩

36. Baltes, "On the Incomplete Architecture of Human Ontogeny." ↩

37. Butler, "The Development of Market-Driven Identities in Young People." ↩

38. Taryn A. Myers and Janis H. Crowther, "Social Comparison as a Predictor of Body Dissatisfaction: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 118, no. 4 (2009): 683, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016763 < https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016763> ; Erin A. Vogel, Jason P. Rose, Bradley M. Okdie, Katheryn Eckles, and Brittany Franz, "Who Compares and Despairs? The Effect of Social Comparison Orientation on Social Media Use and Its Outcomes," *Personality and Individual Differences* 86 (2015): 249–56, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.06.026 <

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.06.026> ; and Chia-chen Yang, Sean M. Holden, and Jati Ariati, "Social Media and Psychological Well-Being Among Youth: The Multidimensional Model of Social Media Use," *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 24, no. 3 (2021): 631–50, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-021-00359-z < https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-021-00359-z> .

39. Paul Gilbert, Kirsten McEwan, Rebecca Bellew, Allison Mills, and Corinne Gale, "The Dark Side of Competition: How Competitive Behaviour and Striving to Avoid Inferiority Are Linked to Depression, Anxiety, Stress and Self-Harm," *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice* 82, no. 2 (2009): 123–36, https://doi.org/10.1348/147608308X379806 < https://doi.org/10.1348/147608308X379806> .

40. Lovisa Broms, Susanna Hedenborg, and Aage Radmann, "Super Equestrians—The Construction of Identity/ies and Impression Management Among Young Equestrians in Upper Secondary School Settings on Social Media," *Sport, Education and Society* 27, no. 4 (2022): 462–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2020.1859472 < https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2020.1859472> ; and Renée Spencer, Jill Walsh, Belle Liang, Angela M. Desilva Mousseau, and Terese J. Lund, "Having It All? A Qualitative Examination of Affluent Adolescent Girls' Perceptions of Stress and Their Quests for Success," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 33, no. 1 (2018): 3–33, https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558416670990 < https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558416670990> .

41. Thomas Curran and Andrew P. Hill, "Perfectionism Is Increasing Over Time: A Meta-Analysis of Birth Cohort Differences from 1989 to 2016," *Psychological Bulletin* 145, no. 4 (2019): 410, https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000138 < https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000138> .

42. Benard Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Digital Capitalism* (Polity Press, 2019).

43. Butler, "The Development of Market-Driven Identities in Young People."

44. Michael Hammond, "Reward Allowances and Contrast Effects in Social Evolution: A Challenge to Zygmunt Bauman's Liquid Modernity," in *Oxford Handbook of Evolution, Biology, and Society*, ed. Rosemary L. Hopcroft (Oxford University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190299323.013.8 < https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190299323.013.8> .

45. Jessica N. Fish, Lauren B. McInroy, Megan S. Paceley, Natasha D. Williams, Sara Henderson, Deborah S. Levine, and Rachel N. Edsall, "'I'm Kinda Stuck at Home With Unsupportive Parents Right Now': LGBTQ Youths' Experiences With COVID-19 and the Importance of Online Support," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 67, no. 3 (2020): 450–52, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.06.002 < https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.06.002> .

46. Curran and Hill, "Perfectionism Is Increasing Over Time," 410.

47. Marc S. Tibber and Emma Silver, "A Trans-Diagnostic Cognitive Behavioural Conceptualisation of the Positive and Negative Roles of Social Media Use in Adolescents' Mental Health and Wellbeing," *The Cognitive Behaviour Therapist* 15 (2022): e7, https://doi.org/10.1017/s1754470x22000034 < https://doi.org/10.1017/s1754470x22000034> .

48. Tibber and Silver, "A Trans-Diagnostic Cognitive Behavioural Conceptualisation," e7.

49. Rana Dasgupta, "Notes on a Suicide," *Granta* 140, August 3, 2017, https://granta.com/notes-on-a-suicide < https://granta.com/notes-on-a-suicide> .

50. Gemma Cobb, *Negotiating Thinness Online: The Cultural Politics of Pro-Anorexia* (Routledge, 2020).

51. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (The Overlook Press, 1959).

52. Bernie Hogan, "The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media: Distinguishing Performances and Exhibitions Online," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 30, no. 6 (2010): 377–86, https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467610385893 < https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467610385893> .

53. Winegard, Winegard, and Geary, "The Status Competition Model"; and Hammond, "Reward Allowances and Contrast Effects."

54. Wilkinson and Pickett, "Income Inequality and Social Dysfunction"; and Worthman and Trang, "Dynamics of Body Time."

55. Uncle Tupelo, lyrics to "High Water," accessed November 28th, 2023, https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-e&q=uncle+tupelo+high+water+lyrics < https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-e&q=uncle+tupelo+high+water+lyrics> .

56. Van den Berg, *The Changing Nature of Man*.

57. Jennifer D. Campbell, Paul D. Trapnell, Steven J. Heine, Ilana M. Katz, Loraine F. Lavallee, and Darrin R. Lehman, "Self-Concept Clarity: Measurement, Personality Correlates, and Cultural Boundaries," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, no. 1 (1996): 141, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.1.141 < https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.1.141> ; Michael H. Kernis, "Toward a Xonceptualization of Optimal Self-Esteem." *Psychological Inquiry* 14, no. 1 (2003): 1–26, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli1401_01 < https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli1401_01> ; and L. R. Vartanian and L. E. Hayward, "Self-Concept Clarity and Body Dissatisfaction," in *Self-Concept Clarity: Perspectives on Assessment, Research, and Applications*, ed. J. Lodi-Smith and K. DeMarree (Springer, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71547-6_11 < https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71547-6_11> .

58. Han, *The Burnout Society*.

59. Dittmar et al., “The Relationship between Materialism.” ↩

60. Myers and Crowther, “Social Comparison as a Predictor.” ↩

61. Dittmar et al., “The Relationship between Materialism.” ↩

Author Information

Stephen M. Butler

I am a child clinical psychologist by training and Professor in the doctoral clinical psychology training program at UPEI in Canada. I am also an Honorary Associate Professor at University College London (UCL), UK following 18 years employment in the doctoral training program in clinical psychology. My research interests are primarily in studying the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents, where I have contributed to both quantitative and qualitative studies. Over the last five years, I have been developing a conceptual and evidence-based framework to help understand the impact of socio-political and socio-cultural factors, a.k.a. capitalism, on child and adolescent well-being. This is my first collaboration with Nathaniel Coward and a welcome progression to writing a more interdisciplinary paper in this area.

View all of Stephen M. Butler's articles.

Nathaniel Coward

Nathaniel Coward is a PhD student in Educational Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island, with a background in theory and criticism. His research areas include theories of learning and development, reflexive models, and cross-cultural, comparative epistemology. Nathaniel’s previous graduate research focused on a phenomenological/existential model of human development, contextualizing specific experiences of “wonder” (*Thaumazein*) as indicative of the individual’s passage through communal and historical institutions that paradoxically reframe intersubjectivity without subjects. His current research is focused on addressing the urgent need to understand the role of education in resisting conspiracy-

driven, political division. This is his first collaboration with Dr. Stephen Butler and a welcomed opportunity to exercise more interdisciplinary thinking.

View all of Nathaniel Coward's articles.

Article details

Stephen M. Butler & Nathaniel Coward, "Young People's Self-Making in Neoliberal Capitalism: Challenges and Opportunities," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.10

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

How Vital is Nature? Animated Bodies and Agency in Contemporary Capitalism

by Gareth Dale | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024), Political Economy and the Arts

ABSTRACT This paper brings into conversation two ontologies that depart from the anthropocentric norm: new materialism, represented here by the US vitalist philosopher Jane Bennett, and the animated cosmology common among Indigenous peoples, as an example of which I take *Braiding Sweetgrass* by the Potawatomi bryologist Robin Wall Kimmerer. I provide exegeses of both philosophies, with respect in particular to the notion of "animation," noting that the animated sphere is much more extensive for Bennett than for Kimmerer. I then track Bennett's shift away from environmental ethics. Finally, I relate differences in philosophy to differences with regard to race and racism, with a detailed discussion of Bennett's tribute to Walt Whitman, and the genocidal elements within his democratic politics.

KEYWORDS Jane Bennett, capitalism, nature, networks, new materialism, vitalism

Which bodies are animated? And which have agency—the capacity to act independently and to exercise free choices? The broadest answer to the first is that all are in movement. Whether a maggot or a moon of Mars, all bodies exist in "an uninterrupted process of transformation."[1] But living beings are animated in a qualitatively richer sense than inert matter, and many of them possess "a freedom of self-movement." The degree to which this approximates free activity, of course, varies according to species. Humans stand out in their enjoyment of full "spiritual"

agency, i.e., agency that encompasses the ability to "question, challenge, and transform" our purposes.[2]

To some, this anthropocentric model appears troublingly hierarchical. After all, if there is one stand-out feature of the contemporary world order, neoliberal capitalism, it is the war on the other species with which humans share the planet, that humans have been pursuing through climate change and ocean acidification, pollution and plastics, livestock agriculture and other forms of habitat destruction. Many of Earth's biogeochemical processes are, thanks to human interventions, deteriorating at breakneck speed and along multiple dimensions.[3] Against this backdrop it is scant wonder that concerned citizens seek to emphasize their solidarity with other species, or that some philosophers are questioning, challenging, and seeking to transform anthropocentric ideologies, as well as any that relegate "nature" to the status of resource or inventory.

At first sight one might assume that the critique of anthropocentric ontology and the affirmation of "animated nature" would align with environmental ethics, but that is not necessarily so. In this article I explore why that might be, by exegesis of two philosophical positions. One is the Indigenous cosmology of animation, as an example of which I take *Braiding Sweetgrass* by the Potawatomi bryologist Robin Wall Kimmerer. The other is the new materialism, represented here by the US vitalist philosopher Jane Bennett.

For Kimmerer and Bennett alike, the non-human cosmos teems with animated bodies. To explore them they take a personal approach that skips around prescribed scholarly boundaries. In Bennett's case, her appreciation of the style of two of her guiding lights, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, applies equally to her own: it tends to "float between genres—part political theory, part mythmaking, part poetry, part speculative philosophy."[4] For Kimmerer, the approach is encapsulated in her title, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Sweetgrass, "the hair of

Mother Earth," has traditionally been braided by Native American peoples to show their care and their appreciation of the gifts she brings. "Braiding" refers to the book's structure, woven from three strands: Indigenous and scientific worldviews and the author's life story.

In juxtaposing Indigenous and new-materialist philosophies, this essay explores the politics involved in extending principles of animation and agency to non-living bodies. Further, and with reference to Karl Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, it suggests that to fully appreciate the natural world requires a relational, dialectical understanding of humanity's position within it, entailing an awareness that human society not only exists within "animated" nature, but is actively undermining that animacy.

The Animated Universe of Jane Bennett

My account of Bennett's philosophy is distilled from her three most recent books: *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (2001)*, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010)*,* and *Influx & Efflux: Writing Up with Walt Whitman* (2020). In them, she explores her fascination for "the phenomenon of animation—of dead things coming alive, of objects revealing a secret capacity for self-propulsion," and fashions philosophical tools for an "enchanted materialism."[5] A motivating factor is her objection to the instrumental view of nature as "an inert set of resources awaiting human deployment."[6] Against this, she pitches for an "experience of enchantment" whereby humans learn to stir their bodies together with the matter around them, recognising in it some of the agency that "we officially ascribe only to ourselves."[7] Alluding to the hermetic tradition of Paracelsus, she depicts the universe as pervaded by animist elements. But where Paracelsus perceives in this a life-giving spirit that ultimately is God, Bennett's enchanted materialism

construes the cosmos not as divinely conjured yet "lively and wondrous" nonetheless.[8]

This post-humanist ontology is developed further in *Vibrant Matter* (2010). Drawing on a lineage that includes Democritus, Baruch Spinoza, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Henri Bergson, Bennett paints a vitalist universe in which all is conative and agentive, with non-human objects understood as "bona fide participants." Their lack of purpose notwithstanding, non-living materials are "forces to be reckoned with." All things are "vital actants"—whether a woodlouse, a lump of lead, the corpse of Bruno Latour, or a gooseberry.

In *Influx & Efflux* (2020), we are treated to further discussion of the merging of human society into a "continuum of lively bodies and forces—a continuum that elides conventional dichotomies of life and matter, organic and inorganic, subjective and objective, agency and structure."[9] Agency is not located in humans but *distributed* across the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, and in Whitman's poetry we find some choice illustrations. The affect and performance of "pluck" is one such. Bennett presents pluck as a democratic spirit, a stance critical to civic life, and one that in Whitman we find in the conjunction of an object—an axe—and the humans who created and wield it. Together, this assemblage forms "the collective agency of pluck." The miners and the metal ores and the axe itself are all active presences in the axe-wielder's life. Thus the axe, Bennett summarizes, "enables the pluck of men."[10]

Whitman, in Bennett's reading, is peculiarly alive to non-human agency because, for him, individual egos are not self-enclosed but porous to outside influences, "to the limber motion of brawny young arms, the shapely naked wan of the broad-axe, the sweat of armpits, [and] indeed, every atom."[11] Drawing on Francis Galton's interest in physique and Whitman's in phrenology, Bennett searches for aesthetic dispositions and performances of self-improvement and "moral health." In the "gravitational Sympathy" of "bodily postures" she seeks a democratic

stance that can resist the sorts of behavioural codes—those framed as ethics or as "societal ideals"—of which she is wary.[12]

Robin Wall Kimmerer: Nature Loves Us Back

At first sight, Kimmerer appears to sit within a similar landscape. She, too, is rebuking the Western concept of a Great Chain of Being with homo sapiens at the apex. "In Native ways of knowing," she writes, humans are regarded as having "the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn—we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance."[13] The objects and beings we encounter in nature should be viewed not as resources but more like elder relatives whom we respect and from whom we have much to learn. Kimmerer sees not only living beings—the archaea, bacteria, fungi, plants, animals, etc.—as animated, but also water, fire, and even the rocks and mountains, not least in their propensity to give gifts to one another and to humans. She contrasts "the language of animacy" that we find among infants and Indigenous peoples with the soulless materialism that prevails in capitalist, and especially settler-colonial, modernity.[14] For these regimes, the disenchantment of nature serves a purpose. Referring to living plants and animals as "it" turns them into natural resources, as if they are private property, as if the earth were not "a bowl of berries" but an open cast mine.[15]

The differences between Bennett and Kimmerer, however, are instructive. One that catches the eye is that, for Kimmerer, the animated sphere comprises the natural world along with some cultural artifacts (songs, drums, sacred medicines, and stories), but the majority of artificial objects are confined to the inanimate sphere. The market system is seen as particularly problematic as it drives the alienation of humans from their natural environment; it "grants personhood to corporations but denies it to the more-than-human beings."[16] For Bennett, by

contrast, *everything* is animated, and many human artefacts, such as nanotechnology and personal computers, are marvellously enchanted too. Enchantment "never really left the world," as eco-spiritualists suppose. It merely changed its shape.[17]

If one sentence encapsulates Kimmerer's approach it is her book's self-description as "a braid of stories meant to heal our relationship with the world."[18] The subject is "us," humanity, the predicate is our relationship with the world that we inhabit but which is being unbalanced by the market system, the social order that has come to govern us. Her work is guided by the need to restore well-being, "to make things whole."[19] Let us weep for the world that we are breaking apart, she writes, "so we can love it back to wholeness again."[20] Required is a culture of reciprocity. Each person, whether human or not, "is bound to every other in a reciprocal relationship . . . . If I receive a stream's gift of pure water, then I am responsible for returning a gift in kind." One of the "gifts" that mark humans out from the rest of the natural world is precisely our capacity for "gratitude," the sentiment on which cultures of reciprocity are built. "It's such a simple thing," she writes, "but we all know the power of gratitude to incite a cycle of reciprocity."[21]

There is, then, a relaxed dualism throughout *Braiding Sweetgrass*, in that it recognizes the distinctive agency, powers, reflexivity, and responsibilities of human society while also perceiving our rootedness in the natural realm. The humanity-nature connection is repeatedly referred to as a relationship, one that requires care and love—and for love to be reciprocated, such that humans and nature can flourish together, we have to recognize the animacy of the natural realm. As one of Kimmerer's students puts it, "You wouldn't harm what gives you love."[22] Nature loves us and will respond to our love, is the book's central message. This is, then, a richly relational perspective on the animation of nature, pivoting on a tragic sensibility—human society is destroying nature, sapping its animacy—and a faith that love of nature is indispensable for greater tragedies to be averted and for humankind to come to love its own.

New Materialism vs. Environmental Ethics

In Bennett, by contrast, the human-nature dualism is anything but relaxed. It is of course present. The fact that humanity is degrading nature as a result of the alienated social system(s) that we have constructed creeps onto the pages. But any such glimpses are awkward. They are repeatedly repressed by her conceptual framework, a flat ontology that dissolves homo sapiens into the writhing cosmos. As an example, consider food consumption. Eating, for Bennett, is not a subject-object relation, but an encounter between actors—human and foodstuff—each of which transforms the other. What this effaces is that one actor eats, the other is eaten. It seems, the cultural theorist Simon Schleusener remarks, that from her espousal of an anti-hierarchical ontology, actual hierarchies "that are informed by a strikingly asymmetric distribution of power—as, for instance, the relations between humans and animals—are rendered quasi non-existent."[23]

The framework may appear radical in its species humility, yet the price paid is the relinquishing of the footholds of social critique—it is unable to grasp that humanity, having emerged within the natural world, has come to dominate and destroy it. Equipped with the new materialism, then, we are freed from environmental ethics. If humans are simply one entity among squillions, just doing our thing like the woodlice, the gooseberries, or the lump of lead, why should we seek to tread lightly on the earth?

Bennett recognizes that her ontology sits uncomfortably with environmental ethics. In 2001, when she asked herself "what is the content of my ethic of enchanted materialism?," the answer was a "hyperecological sense of interdependence" that proceeds from "the principle of treading lightly on the earth."[24] In her next book, in 2010, she comes to see that it does not in fact proceed from any environmental or ecological principle (with or without the

"hyper" prefix). Here, she reports, "as I shift from environmentalism to vital materialism, to a heterogeneous monism of vibrant bodies, I find the ground beneath my old ethical maxim, 'tread lightly on the earth,' to be less solid."[25] According to this maxim, the "earth-affirming norm" of frugality, "I should try to minimize the impact of my actions so as to minimize the damage or destruction of other things with which I share existence."[26] Between her 2001 and 2010 books, Bennett switched from living life "as a human subject," to existing as a vital materialist. She now self-identifies as one among a multitude of "conative actants swarming and competing with each other." Whereas an environmentalist is a self who lives on earth, she writes, "vital materialists are selves who live *as* earth, who are more alert to the capacities and limitations—the 'jizz'—of the various materials that they are."[27] Having adopted this new identity, Bennett came to feel that "frugality is too simple a maxim."[28] When one gives up subjecthood to become an element within a cloud of actants, each swarming and competing, no understanding of power relations need enter into one's account of the world, and little moral accountability either—still less, one that construes humanity as a structured ensemble that is causing fearful harm to our natural environment and needs to be won to a different sense of responsibility and/or a different social system. Instead, one's "ethical responsibility now resides in one's response to the assemblages in which one finds oneself participating."[29] The remaining options are to extricate oneself "from assemblages whose trajectory is likely to do harm," or, conversely, to enter "into the proximity of assemblages whose conglomerate effectivity tends toward the enactment of nobler ends."[30] It is a stance that, as others have noted, is attuned to the prevailing ethic of contemporary capitalism—a "neoliberal mindset" that conceives of politics in almost entirely voluntaristic terms.[31]

Bennett's world, in which human agency is radically de-emphasized, is also, notes Andreas Malm, one that tends to exclude moral responsibility.[32] His observation comes in a commentary on Bennett's study of a blackout in North America, in which she exonerates the politicians and energy corporations who maintain

responsibility for the grid. What was, then, the cause? “Though it would give me great pleasure to assert that deregulation and corporate greed are the real culprits,” she instead takes great pleasure in asserting that the real culprit was the fact that an electricity grid is an “assemblage composed of intersecting and resonating elements.”[33] As such, friction among the elements and, therefore, ultimately, grid collapse, becomes possible. The power cut, in short, was the grid itself “speaking.” For the grid is best perceived as a congeries of actants that may have included deregulation but also “overprotective” powerplant mechanisms, “the unstable power of electron flows,” “conative wildfires,” and “the wires of transmission lines which tolerate only so much heat before they refuse to transmit the electron flow.”[34] The grid, through the new-materialist looking glass, is not an energy system that humans have produced in capitalist conditions but, rather, “a volatile mix of coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood”—to name just a few of its constituent parts.[35] To describe it in this way, to highlight the roles performed by non-human actants in the course of events, helps us move away from the “blame game,” argues Bennett. It is a method that can profitably be extended to any disaster one chooses. Take, say, the Grenfell Tower fire: occasioned by an assemblage of actants that included oxygen, such a boisterous wee molecule when it rubs up against hot plastic cladding, a quirky meander in the jet stream that spared London heavy rain on June 14, 2017, the unruly wiring of a fridge and the momentary daydream of a worker involved in its manufacture, the fire doors that, in their vibrant recalcitrance, elected not to close properly on that day, and so on. Such an explanation effaces the neoliberal actors and the capitalist and colonial forces that were meaningfully responsible for the disaster.[36]

Quirky and Dialectical Materialisms

Bennett traces her new materialism to an ancient lineage of Democritus and Epicurus, which she contrasts to that of "Hegel-Marx-Adorno."[37] From Democritus comes the image of the cosmos composed of wiggling atoms and from Epicurus the "appreciation of agency within nature."[38] Epicurus developed an "enchantment-friendly materialism,"[39] quarky and quirky, and one can hear Epicurean tones, too, in Bennett's account of freedom's rootedness in the contingencies of the material world,[40] and perhaps too in its hedonistic quest for "sensuous enchantment with the everyday world—with nature but also with commodities."[41] In her critique of Marx, Bennett foregrounds the question of enchantment. For all his partiality to Epicurus, she believes, Marx failed to learn enchanted materialism. His materialism is inert and fixated on "economic structures and exchanges."[42] Nature, in Marx's "onto-story," is "dis-enchanted," for he holds agency to be "concentrated in humans."[43]

To read Marx's materialism as restricted to economic structures or as nature-disenchanting in the manner Bennett suggests, is, frankly, obtuse. Marx does not draw a hard and fast line between humans and other organisms. He repeatedly speaks of the dialectical relationality of the natural order, and of the metabolism of humans and their environment. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, for example, the sun is described as "the object of the plant—an indispensable object to it, confirming its life—just as the plant is an object of the sun, being an expression of the life-awakening power of the sun. A being which does not have its nature outside itself is not a natural being, and plays no part in the system of nature."[44] Humans, similarly, are conceived of in relation to "external" nature. Marx describes "plants, animals, stones, air, light, etc." as "a part of human life and human activity." Nature "is man's inorganic body—nature, that is, insofar as it is not itself human body. Man lives on nature—nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die."[45]

On this question, Judith Butler's reading of the *Manuscripts of 1844* is illuminating. She draws attention to the ways in which Marx depicts living bodies as "animated, brought to life" by the external world, which they reciprocally animate.[46] For humans, the powers of their animation lie "outside of the human subject," their relationship with nature involves "interchange (not exchange), and animation; it establishes the body of nature as essential to the body of man."[47] The vision, in short, is of "human creatures, dependent on nature, as well as on the activity by which nature becomes support and sustenance for living beings."[48] It is on the basis of this understanding of the society-nature metabolism that Marx develops his understanding of its alienated character in class-divided societies. Thus, in the *Manuscripts of 1844*, he describes how the feudal appropriation of nature turns land into "an alien power," an alienation that then becomes ratcheted up under capitalism. "The relation of the worker to the product of labour as an alien object exercising power over him," as he puts it, is "at the same time the relation to the sensuous external world, to the objects of nature, as an alien world inimically opposed to him."[49] The alienation of labor bears most forcefully on workers themselves but is the mechanism of universal estrangement: of "man" from "his own body, as well as external nature and his spiritual aspect, his human aspect, his life activity," and thereby from the potential to unfold his species capacities in freedom.[50] It is, equally, a diagnosis of the disruption of the humanity-nature metabolism and the depredations of the natural world under capitalist conditions. With abhorrence, Marx observed the application of industrial methods to livestock agriculture and, quoting Thomas Müntzer, lamented the conversion of "all creatures—the fishes in the water, the birds in the air, the plants on the earth" into property.[51] Humanity had become "the most active exterminator" of other species and was undermining the habitability of the planet.[52]

Fetishism and the Animation of Commodities

In the 1844 Manuscripts, Marx writes of "the devaluation of the world of men" that follows from "the increasing value of the world of things,"[53] a framework that he developed in *Capital* with the theory of commodity fetishism—the mystified form taken by economic domination in capitalism, whereby social relations take the "fantastic form" of relations between things. Bennett, following from her critique of Marx's disenchanted materialism, reads this as a manifestation of Enlightenment racism: Marx constructs a contrast between the modern world of enlightenment and critical philosophy and the primitive realms of "the negro [and] pagan animism," which he lumps together with the "commodity culture" that is the main target of his critique.[54] In her alternative ontology, commodities are in substance "vibrant," ergo Marx is wrong to theorize them as gaining a (perverse) animation through the construction of the market system. Consequently, whereas commodity fetishism for Marx plays a core role in capitalism's self-justification, with resistance to capitalism found in zones of life that contradict the power of capital (class struggle, etc.), Bennett proposes instead that we "exploit the positive ethical potential secreted within" capitalist processes.[55]

In Bennett's reading, Marx is reproducing the European denigration of fetishism found among "primitive" peoples. This is not a plausible reading; he is doing the very opposite. The concept, of course, arose within a racist discourse in which European travellers and economists portrayed themselves as modern and rational, with a civilized commercial economy, in contrast to the primitive and superstitious "Other." Yet Marx's adaptation of the term is precisely a détournement of this discourse. For him, the European commercial economy is itself profoundly fetishistic. As David McNally observes, Marx "turned the charge of fetish-worship back on the European ruling class, declaring that it was they

who bowed down before objects. Rather than the rationalists they proclaim themselves to be, urged Marx, Europe's rulers in fact idolise things."[56]

Sweetgrass and Stinking Sumac

With "race" in mind, let us return to Kimmerer. A plant of dearest interest to her is sweetgrass. In parts of North America it is embattled. In one field she observes foreign plants such as quackgrass, clover, and daisies encroaching, as well as "a wave of invasive purple loosestrife."[57] Loosestrife in particular exhibits "the colonizing habit of taking over others' homes and growing without regard to limits."[58] To restore the sweetgrass, she proposes in a resonant metaphor, "we'll need to loosen the hold of the colonists, opening a way for the return of the natives."[59]

Bennett, in contrast, speaks of her self-identification with *ailanthus altissima*, or stinking sumac, which "is considered around here to be an invasive weed."[60] Ailanthus "aggressively inhibits (and can even kill) native plants near it." An invasive plant, it:

crowds out native species with its dense thickets and secretes a chemical into the soil that is toxic to surrounding plants. When native plants are hindered or killed, it upsets the balance of the native ecosystem and biodiversity, potentially leading to extinctions of native plant and animal species across the whole ecosystem.[61]

Stinking sumac achieved literary fame in Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. By coincidence it is in her book on another denizen of Brooklyn, Walt Whitman (who happens to be a near exact contemporary of Marx), that Bennett discusses it.[62] Her affinity with alianthus is aesthetic, in tune with the new-materialist ontology: "I too, along with Ailanthus, am leaning and longing, casting and connecting, radiating and being radiated."[63]

Whitman, too, was longing and radiating, an expansive character, a vitalist philosopher, and passionately democratic. But if democracy is often born in violence, in settler-colonial conditions it is steeped in the blood of Indigenous inhabitants.[64] It is puzzling that Bennett's book-length ode to Whitman fails to notice any of this, not even that the axes she extols as actants of democratic "pluck" were simultaneously tools of mass murder. Whitman's "Pioneers! O Pioneers!"—published in the 1860s, a decade of bloody massacres of Native Americans—begins with the call to the westward-marching génocidaires to "get your weapons ready; Have you your pistols? have you your sharp-edged axes?" It continues: "We, the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend . . . O you youths, western youths, full of manly pride . . . . Swift! to the head of the army!—Swift! spring to your places, Pioneers! O pioneers."[65]

I am not suggesting that Whitman's racist and genocidal tendencies eclipse the illuminating elements that Bennett finds in his verse. Nonetheless, his dark side is no recent revelation; its lack of acknowledgment in *Influx & Efflux* is puzzling. As early as 1955, Leadie Clark charged that "Whitman might be construed as advocating genocide in the United States," and that he portrayed "the Indian" as "the man who must vanish."[66] Bennett, Lisa Gilson points out, makes a cursory case that Whitman tacitly critiques racism but neglects to consider his "less savoury statements."[67] These would have revealed his "indifference" to Native Americans, in the words of one of their number, Maurice Kenny, and his obliviousness to their "death cries."[68] In his more generous moods, Whitman did imagine Native Americans as "noble savages"—but this was also why his encounters with the real ones, whom he met when employed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, were generally disappointing. With Social-Darwinist sighing, he contemplates their fate, unfortunate roadkill on the highway to Manifest Destiny. Their race was perishing in the Darwinian manner, naturally succumbing to his "superber" race.[69] The pistols and axes were mere accompaniments, not the cause. And along with "the I***n," the "n****r" would also be eliminated, Whitman confided to his biographer Horace Traubel.[70] This, too, he contemplated without

regret, considering Black people as “baboons” and “wild brutes” whose inclusion in the US body politic discomfited him.[71] Following the Civil War he even advocated forgiveness for the former slavers and Southern whites.

That Bennett fails to address this is striking, but one might respond that it is tangential to her argument. That would be a mistake, for two reasons. One is that Whitman’s genocidal streak is bound up with his exultation in the taming and clearing of wild nature, which Bennett likewise neglects to consider. In “Pioneers! O Pioneers!,” the heroes are celebrated in their labors of modernization: “We primeval forests felling, We the rivers stemming, and piercing deep the mines within; We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving.”[72] In “Song of the Broad-Axe,” the eponymous tool is celebrated as it razes the forests to make room for the “settlements of the Arkansas, Colorado, Ottawa, Willamette,” the factories and railroads, the “Capitols of States,” and so on.[73]

The other is that the Whitman she adores is rooted in the Whitman she ignores. His depiction of the cosmos bursting with vital expansive energies is also his depiction of Walt Whitman bursting with vital expansive energies is also his depiction of his nation and race bursting with vital expansive energies. In a perceptive essay, Benjamin Meiners traces the connections between Whitman’s subjectivity and the settler-colonial context. The poet, in developing his unique approach to the universe, appropriated “tropes associated with indigenous peoples, announcing himself as ‘Fresh, free, savage.’”[74] It is precisely through these tropes that he imagines “an unencumbered ‘I’: free from the state and free from normative, hierarchized modes of belonging”—the fluid ego that excites Bennett. But that unencumbered self, Meiners goes on, “depends upon the expansiveness of land.”[75] The performative erotics of Whitman’s “I,” being “expansive, limitless, ever-fluid,” stem from “the logics of settler colonialism.”[76] If Whitman readers applaud the radicalism of his politics while occluding its relation to “a national/personal expansionist vision,” Meiners concludes, they “run the risk of naturalizing settler colonialism.”[77]

Windigo Economics: Alienated Power in Animated Forms

Cosmologies of universal animation take many shapes; they articulate to any number of political visions. Even some of the architects-in-chief of mechanical natural philosophy (and hence of "disenchantment")—Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle, William Petty, and the Hartlib Circle—maintained attachments to the "enchanted" cosmos, notably Paracelsean Hermeticism with its mystical vision of life and sentience secreted throughout all matter and criss-crossed by "secret ties of sympathy and antipathy."[78] These same gentlemen were zealots of England's bourgeois revolution in its most utilitarian, violent, and settler-colonial forms. That revolution was pivotal to the consolidation of capitalism, which, in turn, proceeded to replace a biodiverse planet with the sixth mass extinction, and the benign Holocene with the perilous Capitalocene. To all this, the dominant response has been to fiddle while the planet burns, justified by fatalism, hedonism, mysticism, and nihilism, as well as denial of the systemic role of capitalism.

The new materialists, in extending agency, risk justifying the fiddling. In dissolving responsibility into the writhing cosmos they exculpate capitalism from the environmental and social violence for which it ought to be held responsible. Their celebration of all bodies, of all matter as "vibrant" cannot get to grips with the axe, or the other tools of environmental destruction, for these are ingrained in the world of matter that they celebrate.[79] Their contribution, Kate Soper observes, is to obfuscate the critical differences between humans and other animals in "creating and (potentially) in resolving ecological crisis."[80] It is *human modes of production* that, in their stark distinction from the cyclical modes of existence of other creatures, "are wrecking the planet, and humans alone who can do something about it."[81] What requires urgent attention are not so much the traits

we share with other species as the peculiar rapaciousness of our social order and the question of how to overcome it.

None of this however should be taken to imply that philosophies that envision non-living bodies, the non-living cosmos as animated, vital, enchanted, etc., are incapable of grasping the peculiar rapacity of the capitalist system. Far from it, and *Braiding Sweetgrass* is a case in point. Whereas a new materialist would approach, say, a stone in essentially abstract terms through the lens of their contemplative ego, Kimmerer's starting point is her community and its relationship to the land. Her favoured pronoun is "we." The stone, for her, is relationally situated: it belongs to the environment to which her communities (her tribe, and current neighbourhood(s), and humanity as a whole) belong, and she to them. This viewpoint is characteristic of Indigenous philosophies worldwide.[82] Unlike in the English language, in which "environment" derives from an Old French term for "enclose," expressing the externalization of nature, Indigenous languages generally lack such a term, reflecting a view of humans as inseparable from plants, animals, and geomorphology.[83] The viewpoint posits the environment as sacred, approaching the cosmos relationally and with an axiology/ethics centred on mutual obligation, reciprocity and accountability—to the land, to other people. It is rooted in community and environment, unlike the "settler mind" which apprehends land as property, as resources. On this basis, it figures capitalism and colonialism as systems that disrupt and disfigure the reciprocal relationships of nature and community. "A world made of gifts," says Kimmerer, "cannot coexist with a world made of commodities."[84] The latter "destroys the beloved earth to line the pockets of the greedy." Our finite planet cannot withstand its trajectory of "infinite growth."[85]

To capture the perversity of capitalist society, Marx turned to the gothic. Its visions of supernatural powers, morbid symptoms, disorientation and the uncanny, of inanimate objects taking on a terrifying vitality, provided tools with which to skewer the prevailing mythologies of progress and prosperity.[86] It was in

the literature of gothic horror, with its inanimate objects coming to life and running amok, that he found the vocabulary with which to depict “the mystifications of capitalist social relations where the phantasms of the bourgeois market return to haunt their creators.”[87] Kimmerer does something similar. To capture the dialectical image of human and natural potential being appropriated by forces of exploitation and oppression, of “fabricated demand and compulsive overconsumption,” of an economic system driving to infinite growth incompatible with the “finite planet,” she coins the term “Windigo economics.”[88] This refers to the mythical beast that once connoted the menace of barren winters but has since been reinterpreted by Native peoples to warn of the dangers of greed and selfishness, of capitalism and colonialism. “We have unleashed a monster. The very earth that sustains us is being destroyed to fuel injustice. An economy that grants personhood to corporations but denies it to the more-than-human beings: this is a Windigo economy.”[89]

Notes

1. Leon Trotsky, “The ABC of Materialist Dialectics (December 1939),” *Marxists.org*, www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1939/12/abc.htm < http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1939/12/abc.htm> .

2. Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (Penguin, 2019), 124.

3. Gareth Dale, “The Great Acceleration: Is It Ending and What Comes Next?,” *The Ecologist*, June 30, 2023, https://theecologist.org/2023/jun/30/great-acceleration-it-ending-and-what-comes-next < https://theecologist.org/2023/jun/30/great-acceleration-it-ending-and-what-comes-next> .

4. Jane Bennett, *Influx & Efflux: Writing Up with Walt Whitman* (Duke University Press, 2020), xxi.

5. Jane Bennett, “Commodity Fetishism and Commodity Enchantment,” *Theory & Event* 5, no. 1 (2001): https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2001.0006 < https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2001.0006> .

6. Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 69.

7. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*, 98–99. ↩
8. Ibid., 92. ↩
9. Bennett, *Influx & Efflux*, 11. ↩
10. Ibid., 13. ↩
11. Ibid., 13. ↩
12. Ibid., 43. ↩
13. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2013), 9. ↩
14. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* 57. ↩
15. Ibid., 383. ↩
16. Ibid., 376. ↩
17. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*, 69. ↩
18. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* x. ↩
19. Ibid., 264. ↩
20. Ibid., 359. ↩
21. Ibid., 115. ↩
22. Ibid., 124. ↩
23. Simon Schleusener, "A Politics of Things? Deleuze and the New Materialism," *Deleuze and Guattari Studies* 15, no. 4 (2021): 528, https://doi.org/10.3366/dlgs.2021.0456 < https://doi.org/10.3366/dlgs.2021.0456> . ↩
24. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*, 157. ↩
25. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), 111. ↩
26. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 121. ↩
27. Ibid.., 111. ↩
28. Ibid., 121. ↩
29. Ibid., 37. ↩
30. Ibid. ↩
31. Schleusener, "Politics of Things?" ↩

32. Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (Verso, 2018).

33. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; and Jane Bennett, "The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout," *Public Culture* 17, no. 3 (2005): 445–65.

34. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; 37.

35. Ibid., 25.

36. Nadine El-Enany, "The Colonial Logic of Grenfell," *Verso*, July 3, 2017, www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/3306-the-colonial-logic-of-grenfell < http://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/3306-the-colonial-logic-of-grenfell> ; and Anthony Barnett, "The Grenfell Inferno," *Open Democracy*, June 22, 2017, www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/age-of-corbyn-2-inferno < http://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/age-of-corbyn-2-inferno> .

37. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xiii.

38. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*, 90.

39. Ibid., 90.

40. Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (W.W. Norton, 2011).

41. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xi.

42. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvi.

43. Bennett, "Commodity Fetishism," 24.

44. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Progress Publishers, 1959), https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf < https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf> .

45. Marx, *Manuscripts of 1844*.

46. Judith Butler, "The Inorganic Body in the Early Marx: A Limit-Concept of Anthropocentrism," *Radical Philosophy* 206 (2019): 15, https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/the-inorganic-body-in-the-early-marx < https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/the-inorganic-body-in-the-early-marx> .

47. Butler, "The Inorganic Body," 13.

48. Ibid.

49. Marx, *Manuscripts of 1844*.

50. Ibid. ↩

51. Karl Marx, "On *The Jewish Question*," *Marxists.org*, February 1844, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question < http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question> . ↩

52. Kohei Saito, "Why Ecosocialism Needs Marx," *Monthly Review* 68, no. 6 (2016): https://monthlyreview.org/2016/11/01/why-ecosocialism-needs-marx/. ↩

53. Marx, *Manuscripts of 1844*. ↩

54. Bennett, "Commodity Fetishism," 23. ↩

55. Ibid., 14. ↩

56. David McNally, *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism* (Brill, 2011), 126–27. ↩

57. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* 239. ↩

58. Ibid., 214. ↩

59. Ibid., 261. ↩

60. Bennett, *Influx & Efflux*, 100. ↩

61. "Tree of Heaven," *The Nature Conservancy*, October 25, 2024. https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/indiana/stories-in-indiana/journey-with-nature–tree-of-heaven < https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/indiana/stories-in-indiana/journey-with-nature--tree-of-heaven> . ↩

62. Bennett, *Influx & Efflux*. ↩

63. Ibid., 100. ↩

64. Michael Mann, "The Dark Side of Democracy: The Modern Tradition of Ethnic and Political Cleansing," *New Left Review* 235 (1999): https://newleftreview.org/issues/i235/articles/michael-mann-the-dark-side-of-democracy-the-modern-tradition-of-ethnic-and-political-cleansing < https://newleftreview.org/issues/i235/articles/michael-mann-the-dark-side-of-democracy-the-modern-tradition-of-ethnic-and-political-cleansing> . ↩

65. Walt Whitman, "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" https://whitmanarchive.org/item/ppp.00707_00802 < https://whitmanarchive.org/item/ppp.00707_00802> . ↩

66. Ed Folsom, *Walt Whitman's Native Representations* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 67. ↩

67. Lisa Gilson, "Review of *Influx & Efflux: Writing Up with Walt Whitman*," *Perspectives on Politics* 19, no. 3 (2021): 975, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592721001237 < https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592721001237> .

68. Folsom, *Walt Whitman's Native,* 67.

69. Whitman, quoted in Steven Blakemore and Jon Noble, "Whitman and 'The Indian Problem': The Texts and Contexts of 'Song of the Redwood-Tree,'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 22, no. 2 (2004): 113.

70. C.A. Conrad, "From Whitman to Walmart," *Poetry Foundation*, June 8, 2015, www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2015/06/from-whitman-to-walmart.

71. Lavelle Porter, "Should Walt Whitman Be #Cancelled?," *JSTOR Daily*, April 17, 2019, https://daily.jstor.org/should-walt-whitman-be-cancelled < https://daily.jstor.org/should-walt-whitman-be-cancelled/> .

72. Whitman, "Pioneers!"

73. Walt Whitman, "Song of the Broad-Axe," https://whitmanarchive.org/item/ppp.00707_00795 < https://whitmanarchive.org/item/ppp.00707_00795> .

74. Benjamin Meiners, "Whitman's Native Futurism: Frontier Erotics in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass,' Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 35, no. 4 (2018): 250.

75. Meiners, "Whitman's Native Futurism," 250.

76. Ibid., 247–48.

77. Ibid., 247.

78. P. M. Rattansi, "The Intellectual Origins of the Royal Society," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society Journal of the History of Science* 23, no. 2 (1968): 133, https://doi.org/10.1098/rsnr.1968.0018 < https://doi.org/10.1098/rsnr.1968.0018> .

79. Moreover, they occlude the ways in which human and non-human bodies become reified—treated as deprived of vitality and vibrancy—through capitalist logics. Carl Cassegård, *Toward a Critical Theory of Nature: Capital, Ecology, and Dialectics* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

80. Kate Soper, "The Humanism in Posthumanism," *Comparative Critical Studies* 9, no. 3 (2012): https://doi.org/10.3366/ccs.2012.0069 < https://doi.org/10.3366/ccs.2012.0069> .

81. Soper, "The Humanism in Posthumanism."

82. Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Fernwood Publishing, 2008).

83. Chandran Nair, “The ‘Awe’ Industry,” *Resurgence & Ecologist* 339 (2023): https://www.resurgence.org/magazine/article6156-the-awe-industry.html < https://www.resurgence.org/magazine/article6156-the-awe-industry.html> .

84. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* 374.

85. Ibid., 308.

86. Andy Merrifield, “Marx on Technology,” *Andy Merrifield*, September 29, 2019, https://andymerrifield.org/2019/09/29/marx-on-technology < https://andymerrifield.org/2019/09/29/marx-on-technology> .

87. Steve Edwards, “Factory and Fantasy in Andrew Ure,” *Journal of Design History* 14, no. 1 (2001): 29.

88. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 308.

89. Ibid., 376.

Author Information

Gareth Dale

Gareth Dale teaches politics at Brunel University. His books include several on the GDR and Eastern Europe, and on the life and work of Karl Polanyi, as well as edited volumes on green growth, international migration, and revolutions in the neoliberal age. His essays have appeared in *The Conversation*, *The Ecologist*, *Truthout*, *The Green European Journal*, *Open Democracy*, *Spectre*, *Jacobin*, *Viewpoint*, and *International Socialist Review*.

View all of Gareth Dale's articles.

Article details

Gareth Dale, "How Vital is Nature? Animated Bodies and Agency in Contemporary Capitalism," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.11

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Without Rethinking Colonialism and Racialization, a Sustainable Future is Not Possible

by Marina Gržinić | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024), Political Economy and the Arts

ABSTRACT In this article, I talk about the performances of global capitalism, its relation to colonization and racialization, and the ways it hinders the well-being of vulnerable bodies. An understanding of the relation between post-colonialism and post-socialism is crucial to this discussion. I therefore start from a territory that is no longer conceivable today, namely former Eastern Europe and its post-socialism of 1990. I then proceed to discuss the relation of post-socialism to post-colonialism and capitalism. I conceptualize and discuss a diagram that illustrates the relations between the former East, the West, the North, and the South, and in particular, the relation between labour and capital and between capitalism and colonialism across these territories. I suggest that if we are to dismantle imperialism, that is, terminate capitalist colonialism, we need to rethink the racial/colonial divide and the imperial/colonial divide.

KEYWORDS decolonial, racial capitalism, settler colonialism

Departure Point

Neoliberal global capitalism, a necrocapitalist system, has been generating its surplus value through marketization and by governing death. Profit is made with entropy, with the transformation of territories into landscapes of death, with millions of people in the South treated as disposable and who will never work because their immobility and poverty are the source of capitalist wealth.

Everything is privatized, exploitation is normalized and therefore no longer needs to be done under the guise of protecting human rights.

The world is on the verge of collapse. Axelle Karera is very clear about the Anthropocene and what would follow a collapse: a redistribution of exploitation and dispossession, where the most exploited have to bear the burden and save the world. To prevent this, it is crucial to first put things back into perspective.

To this end, I want to talk here about the performances of global capitalism, its relation to colonization and racialization, and the ways it hinders the well-being of vulnerable bodies. An understanding of the relation between post-colonialism and post-socialism is crucial to this discussion. I therefore start from a territory that is no longer conceivable today, namely former Eastern Europe and its post-socialism of 1990. I then proceed to discuss the relation of post-socialism to post-colonialism and capitalism. I conceptualize and discuss a diagram that illustrates the relations between the former East, the West, the North, and the South, and in particular, the relation between labor and capital and between capitalism and colonialism across these territories. I suggest that if we are to dismantle imperialism, that is, terminate capitalist colonialism, we need to rethink the racial/colonial divide and the imperial/colonial divide.

Conditions: Post-Socialism and Post-Colonialism

Post-socialism is a condition of the whole of former Eastern Europe. It refers to a transitional moment in the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In the period of post-socialism in the 1990s, former Eastern European countries were strongly pressured by the West to forget their socialist past by breaking off any relationship with socialism. During that time, we, from former-Eastern Europe, activists, intellectuals, artists, etc., witnessed processes of hyper-nationalism and

intensification of internal racialization (for example, the expulsion of Roma communities across Europe and, especially in former Eastern Europe, the massive deportation of refugees from the Middle East and Africa). The crucial question is what this meant for the former Eastern bloc, and by extension for our understanding of contemporary global politics, where post-socialism was considered to be synonymous with post-colonialism. I would like to pave the way to an answer, partly because both carry the prefix "post" and because such an equation is both problematic and false. It should not be forgotten that, although the 1990s was the decade of pretending to "embrace" multiculturalism, the twenty-first century *openly* despises the "Other." The latter is constantly produced through highly racialized mechanisms. This manifests itself in a variety of processes of hyper-discrimination. In the 1990s, multiculturalism was presented, despite good intentions, as the degustation of food and the ghettoization of minorities. It was a process that took place simultaneously with policies attached to multicultural bodies and cultural racism. This cultural racism was seen as "good" until 2001 when an unstoppable process of racialization began; the vision of "us and them" was exemplified in the post-9/11 rhetoric of the need to preserve "our White Occidental Civilization."

After the events of September 11, 2001, neoliberal capitalism further established war as a direct profit machine and death as a currency, and the (over)production of cultural products became completely subordinated to the so-called culture industry. Relying on discrimination and segregation, neoliberal capitalism has evolved at the cost of thousands of lives.

From then on, specifically positions coming from another former territory not only the former Eastern Europe, but as well from the former state of Yugoslavia (that collapsed in the 1991), understood that post-socialism is not, as is wrongly assumed, a post-colonial movement in former Eastern Europe that goes back to the ideas of socialism, but a brutal logic of violence, persecution, discrimination, and racialization in the former Eastern European space (the former Yugoslavia,

Russia, and other post-Soviet countries, etc.). In addition, in the former Eastern Bloc and former Yugoslavia, we have seen violence on an incredible scale against LGBTQI+ people: beatings, killings, and disregard for their basic human rights. We also see bodies floating in the sea every day, bodies of people trying to get to the "former" Western Europe: refugees, undocumented people from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, and people who have drowned on the coasts of, for example, Italy, Malta, Greece, and, increasingly, Libya.

While these processes of violence and racialization in the "former East" are ongoing, the "hot former West," the once "first capitalist world," remains a Christian-capitalist patriarchal colonial and antisemitic regime. The "hot" West employs processes of financialization and liberalism that go hand in hand with the inclusion of all those who were perceived as "Other" in the past, such as non-heterosexual identities (although there is still much discrimination against trans* people), into its neoliberal-necrocapitalist (albeit now largely imaginary) biopolitical matrix of power. However, this is not a new "enlightened logic" of the "former West" that is more civilized than the "former East." Because, while on the one hand, it includes white gays and lesbians and queer citizens of the Western nation-state, on the other hand, simultaneously, it produces an endless list of new "Others" in the West: migrants, refugees, Sans-Papiers, Muslims, people of color and women who come from other parts of the world and other religious backgrounds. And, of course, the practice of including LGBTQI+ communities in the West carries the risk of reproducing homonormativity, whitewashing the movement, and producing subtle new racializations.

So not only is post-socialism not post-colonialism, but on the contrary, it has paved the way for an extremely rapid hyper-neoliberalization of the entire former Eastern Europe, so that the former Eastern Europe is no longer post-socialist, but turbo-fascist-capitalist. Although the West (or the Occident) is also racist and fascist, it is nevertheless important to understand that the forms of this type of expropriation and dispossession take a different shape.

From Post-Socialism to Turbo-Fascist Capitalism

This article is the continuation of elaborations of two previous texts on a similar topic. They are both a result of a workshop setting in the former Eastern Europe, the former Yugoslavia, one in Belgrade (Serbia), the other in Prizren (Kosovo). In the first, published in the *Dversia* special issue,[1] I have addressed the historical reading of the decolonial horizon. In the late 1990s, and early 2000s, and parallel to Gayatri Spivak's text,[2] decolonial theory proposed the colonial matrix of power as a revolutionary foundation or basis for the twenty-first century. The colonial matrix of power implies a reflection on enduring processes of racialization and subjugation that emanate from colonialism and persist in a form of coloniality to this day. I have used it as an analytical tool here to discuss the relations between capitalism and socialism by looking at the collapse of socialism and the development of post-socialism in the 1990s. As I began to illustrate in the previous section, post-socialism is a path to (turbo) capitalism and is not a post-colonial discourse. Presently, we have what I call turbo-fascist capitalism throughout the post-Eastern European space.

In the second text, which takes the form of a trialogue between Tjaša Kancler, Piro Rexhepi, and myself, and which was published under the title "Decolonial Encounters and the Geopolitics of Racial Capitalism,"[3] we further developed Cedric Robinson's analytical tool of racial capitalism through a discussion of post-socialism. Post-socialism in the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, was a period of the disintegration of socialism in all sorts of ways, the privatization and monopolization of everything, and the complete subsumption of once socialist individuals of countries in the former Eastern European region (many of which are now part of the EU) into the iron neoliberal capitalist law of market and profit. This transition has led to the transformation of Eastern European bodies and identities into commodities. Whether as a source of cheap labor or as cultural stereotypes,

former Eastern Europeans were often perceived as expendable. The prevailing narrative portrayed us as initially colonized by socialist forces under socialism, only to be further commodified under capitalism, shaping our thinking and behavior accordingly. This problematic perception of former Eastern Europeans helps many post-socialist, now turbo-capitalist, nations in the former Eastern Europe embrace the local right-wing hyper-nationalist fascists and political profiteers in power. And since this all works in the "Occident," unlike in the "West," as mentioned above (not through turbo-fascism, but through postmodern fascism, hyper-individualization and the war state), the support of local predatory politics by international neoliberal politicians is not surprising. Despite all stated, this does not excuse post-socialist people from drifting into hyper-nationalism and turbo-fascism.

The events of 2001 resulted in not only turbo-fascism and hyper-nationalism but also led to important political impulses for new activism and political transnational solidarities in these geographical areas. For some strands of decolonial theory, however, the entire space of the former Eastern Europe is considered obsolete.[4] The analysis for such an explanation is paradoxically based on a Western post-structuralist semiotic reading, while completely failing to analyze turbo- and necrocapitalism in the region and its mode of reproduction.

Post-socialism is an almost infinite transition to turbo-fascist capitalism. The post-socialist state exclusively reinforces its national format and introduces as much as possible hyper-violent capitalist relations: it is violence carried out by the state and its apparatuses to naturalize racist labor. To understand these relations between the former East and the West, North, and the South, colonialism and fascism, I decided to conceptualize the diagram below. Everything that follows as elaboration is closely related to this diagram. The explanation goes back and forth explaining its constitutional parts.

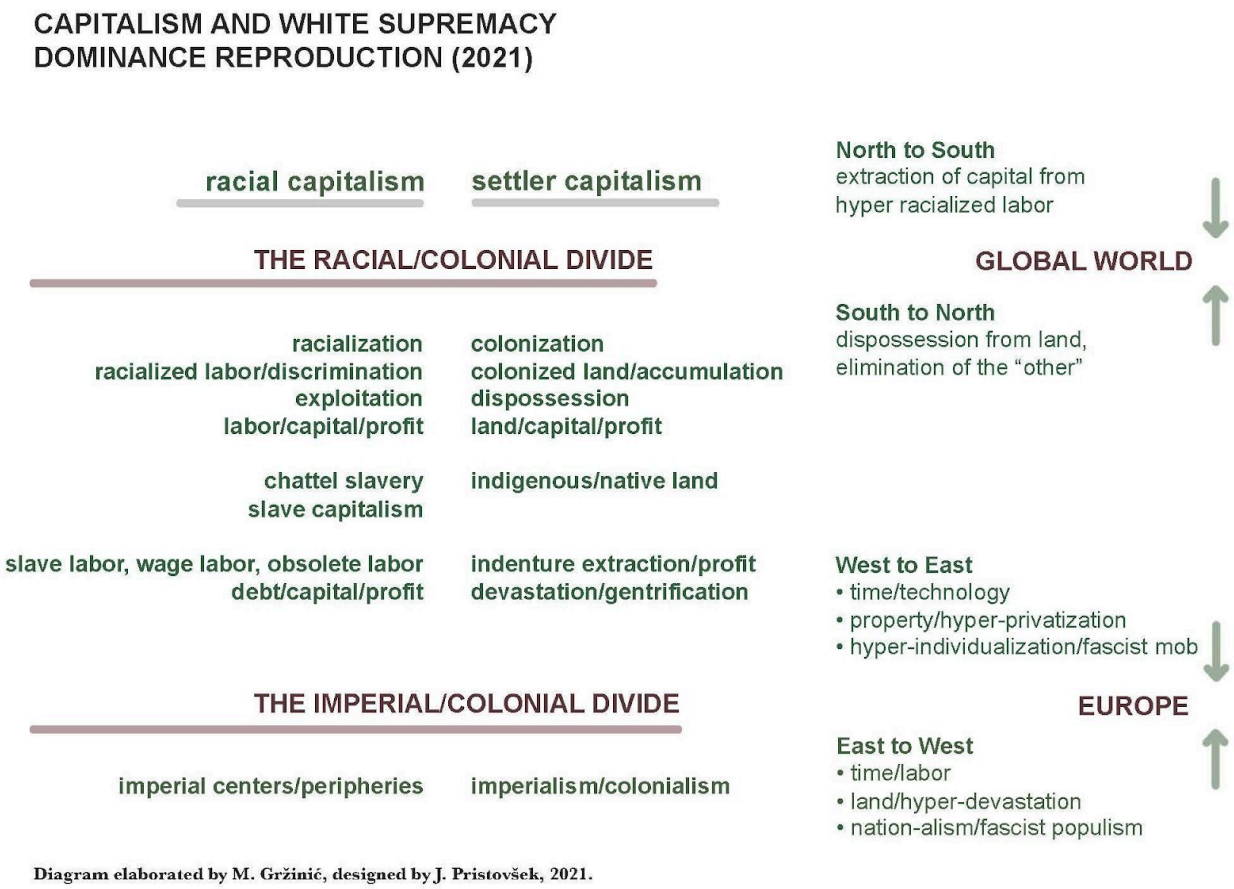


Figure 1. "Capitalism and White Supremacy: Dominance Reproduction," 2021; designed by Jovita Pristovšek based on the structure elaborated by Marina Gržinić.

This diagram summarizes the main points of the passages I have identified above. It frames racialization, dehumanization, and othering through the study of the capitalist system of reproduction, which was fully implemented throughout former Eastern Europe, and finally through the global necrocapitalist world. It allows for exploring racialized (re)production, the connection between labor and capital, and the functioning of capitalism as the other side of colonialism (or vice versa). I will not only enter the analysis semiotically but consider labor and its forms, enslaved labour, wage labour, and disposable labor will be key components of my analysis. To explain the relationship between capitalism, colonialism, racialization, and the former Eastern Europe, it is important to start with a discussion of primitive accumulation and its relation to capitalism.

Primitive Accumulation and Capitalism

In “On Race, Violence, and So-called Primitive Accumulation,” Nikhil Pal Singh argues that one of the biggest problems in understanding the place of colonialism and violent racialization and enslavement within capitalism is the separation of the pre-phase of capitalism, named primitive accumulation, and what is to come and referred to as “proper” capitalism.[5] In this pre-phase, Marx registers the violence, the hyper-violence, necessary to form super-exploited people under slavery, which will then figure as only a pre-stage of “proper” capitalism and its development. As Singh suggests, the “enduring historical and theoretical challenge posed by this sketch revolves around how to interpret the temporal and conceptual cleavage”[6]— the split between the primitive accumulation of capital and the ordinary accumulation of capital in what we might call “real” or “developed” or “proper” capitalism.

As early as 1983, in his seminal book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Robinson[7] challenges the point of Marxist theory that capitalism in its primitive accumulation phase was not yet proper capitalism. As Robin D. G. Kelly writes of Robinson’s concept in the introduction to *Boston Review*’s issue on “Race, Capitalism and Justice”:

> Robinson challenged the Marxist idea that capitalism was a revolutionary negation of feudalism. Instead capitalism emerged within the feudal order and flowered in the cultural soil of a Western civilization already thoroughly infused with racialism. Capitalism and racism, in other words, did not break from the old order but rather evolved from it to produce a modern world system of "racial capitalism" dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism and genocide. Capitalism was "racial" not because of some conspiracy to divide workers or justify slavery and dispossession, but because racialism had already permeated Western feudal society. Robinson suggested that racialization within Europe was a colonial process involving invasion, settlement, expropriation, and racial hierarchy. The first European proletarians were *racial* subjects (Irish, Jews, Roma or Slavs, etc.), and they were victims of dispossession (enclosure), colonialism, and slavery *within Europe*. Indeed, Robinson suggested that racialization within Europe was very much a *colonial* process involving invasion, settlement, expropriation, and racial hierarchy.[8]

Kelly's reading of Robinson makes clear that there is no capitalism without colonialism. I, therefore, suggest that to critically assess the institutions built on the soil of colonialism and which perpetuate neoliberal global capitalism, we need to rethink the two main divisions mediated by decolonial theory and decolonization as analytical tools: the racial/colonial divide and the imperial/colonial divide.

The processes of racialization and discrimination are repetitive and continuous, and the relationship between labor and capital is violent and defines (neo-)liberal parliamentary democracy (which Achille Mbembe[9] speaks of as racial democracy) and its institutions. Moreover, today's capitalism and racism reinforce the transformation of all social, political, and economic relations in Europe. We see how well-rehearsed procedures that work in the West are being implemented in the East. The former Eastern European states resemble the White power regimes of their Western brothers, which quickly and brutally impose a merciless logic of hyper-neoliberalism on the entire territory. The understanding of these processes is important to the understanding of global politics, although the view

of some decolonial authors (e.g., Madina Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo[10]) is that the former socialist countries in Europe are dysfunctional, archaic, and outdated, and therefore unable to develop a critical stance. Such a view resembles the post–World War II narratives when the Occident, instead of dealing with the Holocaust, and antisemitism and genocides of World War II, shifted the discourse as a struggle between democracy and totalitarianism. It is always a certain "Other" that is not worthy of consideration.

The Racial/Colonial Divide into World Geographies

The racial/colonial divide traverses and reorganizes two forms of capitalism: racial capitalism and settler capitalism. Sarah E. K. Fong theorizes them together, speaking of racial-settler capitalism "as an intervention into prevailing approaches to racial capitalism and settler capitalism."[11] She emphasizes "first, that the development of capitalist relations in the United States depended upon both the exploitation of racialized labor and the accumulation of Indigenous lands," and second, "how the violent relations of racial-settler capitalism are remade through attempts to cultivate consent and desire among African-descended and Indigenous peoples."[12] What is at stake in racial capitalism is the connection between labor and capital, whereas in settler capitalism it is the connection between land and capital.

For settler capitalism, the most important internal process is colonization; for racial capitalism it is racialization ("labor exploitation is indebted to theories of racial capitalism, which identify the fundamentally racial nature of labor exploitation").[13] As Fong argues, "Cedric Robinson's stratifications between labour and capital are organized by racial difference such that racialized lower classes provide the labour and resources necessary for the accumulation of wealth by the ruling classes. For Robinson, the term racial capitalism identifies the

imbrication of capitalist production and the differential valorization of racialized life."[14]

What is essential is that both the process of racialization and that of colonization do not leave out the social; on the contrary, for extraction and dispossession through racialization to work, the space of the social must also be racialized, blasted by racist and classist ideologies. These ideologies support and feed liberal individualism (that everything is "free" to exchange and therefore free to sell), and obscure the fact that democracy works exclusively through violence (democracy is only promoted and recalibrated through the constant use of violence). In 2015, Jodi Melamed emphasized the power of racial capitalism as an analytical tool on three levels: 1. In understanding "primitive accumulation—where capital is accrued through transparently violent means (war, land-grabbing, dispossession, neo/colonialism)"[15] while forming the basis of capitalist reproduction; 2. In seeing how the ideologies of individualism, liberalism, and democracy blossom from this very foundation and destroy any sense of community; and 3. In recognizing new forms of political activism that challenge these relations.[16]

Settler capitalism and settler colonialism are organized around the imposition of space over time, which means that the total dispossession of land by the necro-capitalist power structure and its violent supremacist regimes is central. In the context of the dispossession of Indigenous people, the ultimate goal is the destruction and elimination of the community, of the people. At the same time, capitalism cannot reproduce itself without the extraction of surplus value from racialized labor. Racialized labor exploitation and territorial expansion as accumulation through dispossession, Fong argues, constitute the liberal self, which is the object and tool of racial, colonial subjugation.[17]

The dynamics described in Figure 1, the 2021 diagram on "Capitalism and White Supremacy: Dominance Reproduction" by Marina Gržinić, illustrate the

exploitative global relations rooted in colonial and racist hierarchies.

Here I propose a detailed explanation of how these relations work.

Global World

North to South: extraction of capital from racialized labor

This flow represents the ongoing exploitation of the Global South by the Global North, a process deeply tied to the legacy of colonialism. Racialized labor—labor predominantly performed by people from historically colonized and marginalized regions—is systematically undervalued and exploited to create wealth for the Global North. This exploitation occurs through multinational corporations, resource exploitation, and supply chains that rely on low-wage labor in the South to maximize profits in the North. Examples include agricultural production, textile manufacturing, and mineral extraction, where laborers work in oppressive conditions for minimal pay.

The undervaluing of racialized labor is consistent with the profit-maximising imperatives of capitalism, which perpetuates the concentration of wealth in the global North while perpetuating poverty and dependency in the South. Through the racialization of labor, people in the Global South are classified as inherently "cheaper" or less valuable, reinforcing ideologies of white supremacy that dehumanize and commodify the "Other."

South to North: dispossession of land and elimination of the "Other"

This flow highlights how the global North benefits from the dispossession and erasure of communities in the global South, which are presented as obstacles to capitalist expansion and resource extraction. Land traditionally owned by indigenous or local communities is seized for agricultural, mining, or infrastructure

projects, often through legal or extra-legal means such as land grabbing, privatization, or forcible displacement. This reflects the colonial strategies of land grabbing under the guise of development or modernization. The “Other” refers to racialized, non-white populations that are seen as an obstacle to capitalist efficiency. This elimination is not always physical, but also includes cultural erasure, forced assimilation, and environmental destruction. For example, capitalist land use models replace traditional ways of life and knowledge systems, further marginalising these communities. Dispossession enables the extraction of natural resources and raw materials that fuel industries in the Global North, further enriching their economies and populations.

These two processes are not isolated, but closely interlinked:

- The wealth created by the extraction of capital from racialized labor (from North to South) is sustained by the continual displacement and elimination of communities in the South (from South to North).
- Dispossession ensures a constant supply of land and resources for exploitation, while the racialization of labor maintains the low costs necessary for capitalist profitability. This double flow reveals how capitalism and white supremacy work together to maintain global hierarchies. The Global North enriches itself at the expense of the Global South, while systemic inequalities are perpetuated along racial and geographic lines.

Europe

The dynamics that I have described for Europe in Figure 1, the 2021 diagram on “Capitalism and White Supremacy: Dominance Reproduction,” reflect a critical framework to examine the historical and contemporary socio-economic and political dynamics between Western and Eastern Europe. These lines can be interpreted as movements or flows of ideological, material, and structural developments that are influenced by broader colonial and imperialist structures. The dichotomy of West to East and East to West represents unequal exchanges and developments underpinned by capitalism and white supremacy.

Here's how these ideas can be unpacked in a European context:

West to East

1. Time/Technology. The movement from "West to East" symbolizes the imposition of Western ideas of progress, modernity and temporality on the East. Western Europe, having industrialized earlier and positioned itself as a technological pioneer, sees the East as "backward" in development and thus maintains a discourse of superiority. This dynamic maintains dependency through technology transfer under exploitative conditions and widens the gap between the "advanced" and the "catching up."
2. Property/hyper-privatization. After the collapse of the Eastern Bloc (1989), Western neoliberal ideologies have strongly influenced the privatization processes in Eastern Europe. Land, housing, and public property in the East were often sold to Western investors or oligarchs under the guise of modernization. This led to widespread dispossession and social inequality and reflected a colonial strategy of resource extraction and control.
3. Hyper-individualization/fascist mob. Western Europe's focus on neoliberal individualism breaks down collective identities and solidarities and creates fertile ground for reactionary movements. Hyper-individualization in the West is mirrored in the East's vulnerability to fascist mobs, where alienation and disenfranchisement are channelled into nationalist and xenophobic ideologies, exacerbating political polarization.

East to West

1. Time/Labor. Migration from the East of Europe to the West characterizes this flow, in which the West benefits from cheap, flexible and often precarious labor from the East. Time here means exploiting the labor force of Eastern Europe in order to secure the economic productivity and demographic needs of Western Europe. This reinforces the idea of the East as a reservoir of human capital for the West, trapped in an exploitative temporal relationship.
2. Land/hyper-destruction. Western industries and agribusiness have devastated the landscapes of Eastern Europe and exploited its natural resources. This hyper-destruction is a continuation of colonial practices where the land in the periphery is exploited to revitalize the economy in the West-European core. Examples of this include deforestation, monocultures, and mining to serve western markets.

3. Nationalism/fascist populism. As neoliberal globalization destroys traditional livelihoods and identities, nationalist movements are gaining momentum in the East. This nationalism is exported back to the West through populist discourses, where Eastern European ideologies of marginalization and ethno-nationalism meet Western far-right movements. The cyclical rise of fascist populism across the continent is undermining democratic institutions and exacerbating socio-political tensions.

In short, I can state, while in the West, time is technology, in the former East of Europe, time equals labor exploitation. In the West, space is only property, with total privatization; public space has disappeared. In the former Eastern Europe space is ruined, mismanaged, property plundered, and finally privatized through violent gentrification. At the same time, in Eastern Europe, instead of communities, we have only hyper-nationalism, while in the West, a populist mob of hyper-individualized subjects dominates. We need to address the former Eastern Europe after socialism in terms of racism, nationalism, and debt.

The Imperial /Colonial Divide into World Geographies

In this last section, I want to examine the claim of some decolonial positions (e.g. Madina Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo, who I referenced earlier in this text) that the elimination of socialism is a process of decolonization. Although I critiqued earlier in this article the equation of post-socialism with post-colonialism, this obfuscation (of the different posts) can be clarified by analysing the difference between the imperial and colonial divide.

In "Decolonization," Seloua Luste Boulbina offers an analysis of the term for *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon* (2019). There, she develops a remarkable study of how to think decolonization.[18] She notes "that there is no conceivable decolonization without the *correlation* of a society's political, economic, social,

and cultural dimensions, particularly on the post-colonial side."[19] She emphasizes the difference between post-colonial and "some sort of low-cost decolonization [that] is typically post-imperial."[20] The imperial, in such a low-cost reading, is "proper to the ancient metropolis and ancient societies, which apply the idea to objects rather than to social and political structures."[21] She asserts, "[p]olitically, the question extends distinctly on both sides of an imperial-colonial line that I wish to highlight, in order not to conflate problematics that are totally different."[22] This equation of the imperial/colonial divide places the imperial in relation to the periphery and not in relation to imperialism, which would be a clear postcolonial view; for the imperial/colonial divide takes place on the line of interest and power between the center and the periphery, but the colonial is not a question of center and periphery, but of imperialism. Imperialism is exploitation through colonization, with the use of military force, genocide, and the extraction of raw materials from colonies. Therefore, when we talk about "colonization" in Europe, in the former Eastern Europe we are instead talking about European "post-imperial" countries (former metropolises or peripheral cities), as opposed to "post-colonial" African countries (former colonies).

At this point, I return to Figure 1, my 2021 diagram "Capitalism and White Supremacy: Dominance and Reproduction," to delve deeper into its lower content, on "The Imperial/Colonial Divide." In the previous section, I focused on unpacking "The Racial/Colonial Divide." The Imperial/Colonial Divide invites exploration of the dynamics between imperial centers and their peripheries, and analysis of the intricate relationship between imperialism and colonialism.

For Luste Boulbina, decolonization captured by the imperial/colonial divide means that it "underwent a double displacement: on the one hand, from the metropolis to the colony and then from the colony to the metropolis; and, on the other hand, from the political field to the academic."[23] She believes that the idea of decolonization as a struggle has migrated into the academic sphere, into historiography. She explains that the French doctrine of the "colonial pact" was

based on an eloquent division: the metropolises were destined for industrialization, while the colonies had to supply raw materials.[24] As Luste Boulbina notes, "Decolonization was first a political notion, then a historiographical one."[25] She shows that this is a misunderstanding, since the imperial stands between the imperial center and the periphery, but decolonization means eliminating imperialism and colonization. Decolonization wants to destroy colonial imperialism.

Thus, Luste Boulbina argues that to understand the situation we have to differentiate between settler and modern colonies. She underlines that the situation of modern African countries is not comparable to that of the former colonies of the Americas. This is because the former slave colonies of the Americas are all based on a settler model, whereas the last "modern" colonies of Africa, with the exception of Algeria, are not settler colonies. Finally, she argues, the independent states of the Americas must also be distinguished from the independent states of Africa.[26] She holds that the,

> independence movements across the African continent benefitted the autochthonous populations, with the notable exception of South Africa, which only held its first "multi-racial" elections in 1994. In this continent, Algeria is the only former settler colony to have been entirely vacated of its European population. What is at stake in sovereignty is shaped to a large extent by the date of independence—those of the nineteenth century or the most recent ones achieved in the twentieth century—and by the presence or absence of Europeans.[27]

It is central, then, to see the post-imperial and the postcolonial through the postcolonial lens, and not through a semiotic analysis that conflates them. Decolonization is not about the historical philosophy of the imperial city exploiting the periphery but about the dismantling of imperialism, of capitalist colonialism. What happened in 1989 after the fall of the Berlin Wall is a typical post-metropolis situation that has brutally failed, what Lusta Boulbina calls low-cost decolonization. It is important to realize that this is reserved for the former

Eastern Europe. The low-cost decolonization of the rest of former Eastern Europe and Ukraine is typical of the old metropolises and, as Luste Boulbina suggests, relates primarily to the idea of objects, myths, and then to social and political structures. Serbia-Kosovo is in such a relationship today. So, when we talk about colonization in Europe, in former Eastern Europe we mean European post or former metropolises that exercise their power on the territory of what is called their periphery, and not post-colonial African or Asian countries (former colonies). What is crucial to understand is that the processes in former Eastern Europe are erroneously lumped together with the European colonial empires in Asia and Africa as well as in Latin America. An example that illustrates this is the current war in Ukraine, which is leading to destruction, and a necropolitical catastrophe for Ukraine and the EU, which in turn is a new extractivist territory for the dying US empire. These interests are the profit interests of the US military industry or the disposal of obsolete military technology (in Ukraine).

It is vital to reiterate here that decolonization means the abolition of colonization, of the exploitation of colonies for their raw materials. Low-cost decolonization is a view of the failed protagonists of industrialization. Lusta Boulbina is clear that decolonization is not the story of the imperial cities exploiting the periphery, but the dismantling of imperialism, that is, the termination of capitalist colonialism.

Conclusion

I have examined the connections and differences among post-socialism, post-colonialism, racialization, and capitalism, and their effects on vulnerable populations. I have conceptualized and analyzed a diagram depicting these connections and their evolution across the former East, West, North, and South regions over time. My argument asserts that to dismantle imperialism and bring an end to capitalist colonialism, it is imperative to reconsider both the racial/colonial divide and the imperial/colonial divide.

The diagram I have created to illustrate this and the histories exposed in this paper lead to a future of what to expect. Although today's relationship between the US and the EU is different, the logic remains the same. The EU has been turned into a provincial territory and an area for high-level US financing and extractivism. No one will yet claim that US financial interests have colonized the space. These relationships are now playing out between old friends of the West or newfound friends (turbo-nationalist former Eastern European states that are now part of the EU and antisemitic, like Hungary, or homophobic and patriarchal countries, like Slovenia and Poland), all united against the refugees. In this case, the low-cost decolonization in former Eastern Europe turns into an expensive one in Western Europe, but we could come to the point that the same logic exists between the metropolis (US) and the periphery (EU). The UK has always been part of this logic; it functions in the EU as a derivative instrument of the US imperial agenda.

I conclude by questioning whether the relationship between the US and the EU represents a new form of hyper-exploitation and devastation. The conflict in Ukraine has brought about human and ecological destruction in the European region, with bombings and toxins causing widespread devastation. There is mass displacement and loss of life, while the pursuit of green technology has been side-lined. Furthermore, there is a noticeable lack of commitment to protecting refugees from the Global South, including Africa and Asia, and the neoliberal discourse on human rights is rampantly repulsive. Ultimately, what we are witnessing is a new dynamic: a costly provincialization of Europe by the United States.

Acknowledgments

This article is a result of the research programme P6-0014 "Conditions and Problems of Contemporary Philosophy," and the research project J6-4623

“Conceptualizing the End: its Temporality, Dalectics and Affective Dimension,”which are funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

Notes

1. Marina Gržinić, “Theorizing Decoloniality in Southeastern Europe: Vocabularies, Politics, Perspectives,” in “Decolonial Theory & Practice in Southeast Europe,” ed. Polina Manolova, Katarina Kušić, and Philipp Lottholz, special issue, *Dversia*, no. 3 (2019): 168–93, https://dversia.net/4644/dversia-decolonial-theory-practice-southeast-europe/.

2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow-Sacrifice,” *Wedge* 7/8 (1985): 120–30.

3. Marina Gržinić, Tjaša Kancler, and Piro Rexhepi, “Decolonial Encounters and the Geopolitics of Racial Capitalism,” in “Breaking with Transition: Decolonial and Postcolonial Perspectives in Eastern Europe,” ed. Jeta Mulaj, Deniza Mulaj, and Jasmine Wallace, special issue, *Feminist Critique: Eastern European Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies*, no. 3 (2020): 13–38, https://feminist.krytyka.com/en/issues/feminist-critique-3-2020. The issue was prepared in collaboration with the Balkan Society for Theory and Practice.

4. See Madina Tlostanova, “Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of Knowledge, External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference,” *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics* 1, no. 2 (2015): 38–58, https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v1i2.38 < https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v1i2.38> .

5. Nikhil Pal Singh, “On Race, Violence, and So-Called Primitive Accumulation,” *Social Text* 34, no. 3 (2016): 27–50.

6. Singh, “On Race,” 33.

7. Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

8. Robin D. G. Kelley, “What Did Cedric Robinson Mean by Racial Capitalism?,” *Boston Review*, January 12, 2017, https://bostonreview.net/race/robin-d-g-kelley-what-did-cedric-robinson-mean-racial-capitalism < https://bostonreview.net/race/robin-d-g-kelley-what-did-cedric-robinson-mean-racial-capitalism> .

9. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, 2019).

10. See Madina V. Tlostanova and Walter D. Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas* (The Ohio State University Press, 2012).

11. Sarah E. K. Fong, “Racial-Settler Capitalism: Character Building and the Accumulation of Land and Labour in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *American Indian Culture and*

Research Journal 4, no. 2 (2019): 27, https://doi.org/10.17953/aicrj.43.2.fong. ↩

12. Fong, "Racial-Settler Capitalism," 27. ↩
13. Ibid., 30. ↩
14. Ibid. ↩
15. Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 76, https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.1.0076 < https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.1.0076> . ↩
16. Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," 76. ↩
17. Fong, "Racial-Settler Capitalism," 27. ↩
18. Seloua Luste Boulbina, "Decolonization," *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, May 24, 2019, https://www.politicalconcepts.org/decolonization-seloua-luste-boulbina/ < https://www.politicalconcepts.org/decolonization-seloua-luste-boulbina/> . ↩
19. Luste Boulbina, "Decolonization." ↩
20. Ibid. ↩
21. Ibid. ↩
22. Ibid. ↩
23. Ibid. ↩
24. Ibid. ↩
25. Ibid. ↩
26. Ibid. ↩
27. Ibid. ↩

Author Information

Marina Gržinić

Marina Gržinić is a philosopher, theoretician, and artist, recognized as a leading contemporary figure in theoretical and critical thought in Slovenia. Since 1993, she has been a researcher at the Institute of

Philosophy, part of the Scientific Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC-SAZU). Currently, she serves as a Principal Research Associate at the Institute. In addition to her role in Slovenia, Gržinić has been a Full Professor at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Austria, since 2003. Known for her extensive publications, global lectures, and critical engagement, she has been actively involved in video art since 1982.

View all of Marina Gržinić's articles.

Article details

Marina Gržinić, "Without Rethinking Colonialism and Racialization, a Sustainable Future is Not Possible," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.12

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Conscious Delirium of a Traveling Body: The Poetics and Politics of a Creative Practice

by Tara Fatehi | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024), Political Economy and the Arts

ABSTRACT The question of political economy in the arts offers a way into a creative-critical reflection on the challenges associated with navigating identity labels and living a freelance artist's life pressured to conform to institutional expectations particularly within the UK's art scene. This piece is a personal account of a body resisting becoming a symbol, of staying conscious of our socio-political landscape and the ongoing Israeli settler-colonialism. I draw on examples from three of my artworks: the collaborative project *From the Lips to the Moon*, ongoing nights of longform improvised music and poetry in London; *In Observance*, a performative research and intervention at the United Nations in Geneva, involving archival documents related to Palestine; and *Mishandled Archive*, which involves dispersing family photographs and documents in public places, accompanied by daily dances. Through these works, this essay asks: How can historical evidence of imperialism and settler-colonialism be absorbed or resisted within the body? How can we transform loss into movement and togetherness? How late is too late as mounds of rubble and bodies multiply?

KEYWORDS artistic research, bodies, creative, diversity, settler colonialism

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/6-July-2023-Holly-Revell-OE2B0168-Tara-Fatehi.jpg>

From the Lips to the Moon by Tara Fatehi and Pouya Ehsaei with guests Jemima Yong and Sam Warner, July 2023. Photo ©Holly Revell.

This one is called "Circular Economies and Sustainable Strategies"
As a matter of fact this one is called "Let's face it, we're all screwed"
Although I think my mum would call this one "Shushshshshs … I'm trying to chill"

In the realm of kaleidoscopic bananas,
where politicians ride on hovercrafts made of recycled yogurt containers,
and trees grow upside down with roots reaching for the sky,
I see a bulldozer

In a time where elephants roam on stilts
and donkeys sprout wings to soar through the skies,
shadows morph into gargoyles
whispering secrets and conspiracy theories
that defy reason,
I see a bulldozer

Rivers run crimson with the ink of bureaucratic decrees,
mingling with the tears of astonished citizens[1]

I stretch my arms out in front, bend forward, take a breath, and dive. Muffled voices. Warped mirrors. Turn left. I see a bulldozer. Turn right. I see dust. I consciously activate an altered state of consciousness (a delirium?). I see an arm. [pause] I wonder how I can contribute to thinking with bodies and political economies; at a time when thousands of bodies are on the streets—in refuge, in hiding, in resistance, in protest, in rubble.

A sense of confusion opens new doors, not to the right thing but to something. Something worth momentary chasing. Chasing. Chasing a body. [breathe] I think of my body as a freelance artist, as a migrant, as a traveller, as the precarious type with no pension, no private health insurance, no safety net whatsoever, as the diversity. [Don't complain. Don't complain.] Then I think of how much I hate to think of myself and my body as these categories. Then I think "but hate is a strong word." Then I remember I forgot to say that the poem above is something I wrote for the music and poetry nights I co-run, co-host, co-perform, co-everything with musician Pouya Ehsaei called *From the Lips to the Moon* < https://www.lipstomoon.com/> . I wrote and performed this poem in July 2023, when a video of an Israeli bulldozer erasing a street in Jenin in the occupied West Bank went viral, at least in my circles and my world of algorithms.[2]

Now, in October 2023, the media say "a war" has started. Had a war not started when the bulldozer wiped out that street? Or when a cultural centre was bombed

a few years back,[3] or when another village was turned into a checkpoint or when that child was trembling with fear or when masses of people were expelled from their homes 75 years before?[4] Settler colonialism is "a structure not an event."[5] It's a process.

I cut off my thoughts.

Redirect. Redirect. Blink. Switch. Where were we? Political economies.

Blink.

I switch my mind to the precarity of running art events such as *From the Lips to the Moon* in the UK. Of the time and energy spent in writing funding proposals, of the horror (pardon my language) that is the Arts Council England project grants application, which when I last applied to and after a resubmission received it, I swore to myself I will never do this to myself, my body, and my psyche again. But I did—in what seems to me as the crumbling financial landscape of the UK art scene, I had to. Colonial turned neoliberal logics lead to constant cuts in arts and culture funds. Similar logics justify the scaling down or closure of arts and humanities courses across UK universities, further distressing the arts community.[6] Meanwhile, a headache I've been suppressing intensifies. Intensifies. I see my head growing: horns, thorns, eyes, other eyes, pain, worms, worms.

> *I am a monster, a giant, an arsonist*
> *I am a scissor, a catchphrase, a pain in your ears*
> *I'm a robot, a potato, with saffron and salt*
> *I'm a terrified soul*
> *"I'm a loc'd out gangsta, set trippin' banger"*
> *I'm a rock rock rock rock rock in my bones*
> *I'm a bee in the wild, craving flowers and love*
> *I'm a suitable choice,*
> *I'm a diversity token, a potential promise*

I'm a global talent, an endorsable shite
I'm a doctor of art, if anyone gives a fuck[7]

Before moving to the UK, as a young artist living and working in Iran, I never made work about my identity. I hardly ever thought about it. I wasn't brown. I wasn't foreign. I made performances and wrote about the everyday, the randomness of things heard on the radio and on the streets, the noises of mixing soil with screws, knots and bolts, about my city, about a person lost on the street, about the banality of politics. In the absence of a financial support system for the arts, I wasn't seen in categories. I didn't have to explain every artistic choice I made via the colour of my skin or the heritage of my parents or the culture of the carpets. But after migrating to the UK, the distance from home pushed me to create work that was also reflecting, playing with, and subverting my *home*. Later, through the funding systems of the UK I learned, or tried to learn—sometimes managed, sometimes failed—how to present and fit myself into boxes of diversity, queer, and community, to be conscious of being "the exotic one" as and when needed while trying hard to be anti-exoticization in my work and my thinking. I have succumbed to describing my work and myself through the labels of BAME, SWANA, MENA, POC, BIPOC, minority, Global Majority, Global South, etc. while continuing to practice ways of staying fragmented, nonsensical, and illusive—just as I perceive the world to be.

The constant push towards educating and preaching through the arts, towards finding conclusions, and towards giving manifestos, pressures the imagination. It pressures the possibilities of seeing art by "labelable bodies" (is that a term?) out of these labels. Of seeing other ways of thinking. Other ways of expressing, of moving, of reading. Ways of being otherwise. This pressure kills the in-between space—a space which can be more generative than the space of clarity. Under this pressure, the multiplicities of thoughts and methods; of homes or homelessness; of the lack, absence or reshaping of a sense of belonging' of the loudness of the surroundings, the smells, the noise, the noise, the distances, the

personal, the forgotten, the layers under layers under layers are disregarded in order to shape *clear* lessons around diversity and inclusivity. But clarity at what cost? Clarity in what shape? For which reality? From whose eyes? For whose pockets? In her book *Woman, Native Other,* Trinh T. Minh-ha questions the value of correct and clearly-written language—a language of conclusions and closures. For her, clarity aims to "impose order" and communicate "an unambiguous message" creating a power structure that teaches good behaviour through correct language.[8] Many "labelable bodies" are pressured to educate others through their art, to be clear, and to be a messenger of a faraway land. But I find more compassion and togetherness in pauses, lapses, open-endedness, blanks, mistakes, lapses, questions, doubts, lapses, echoes. In the confusion.

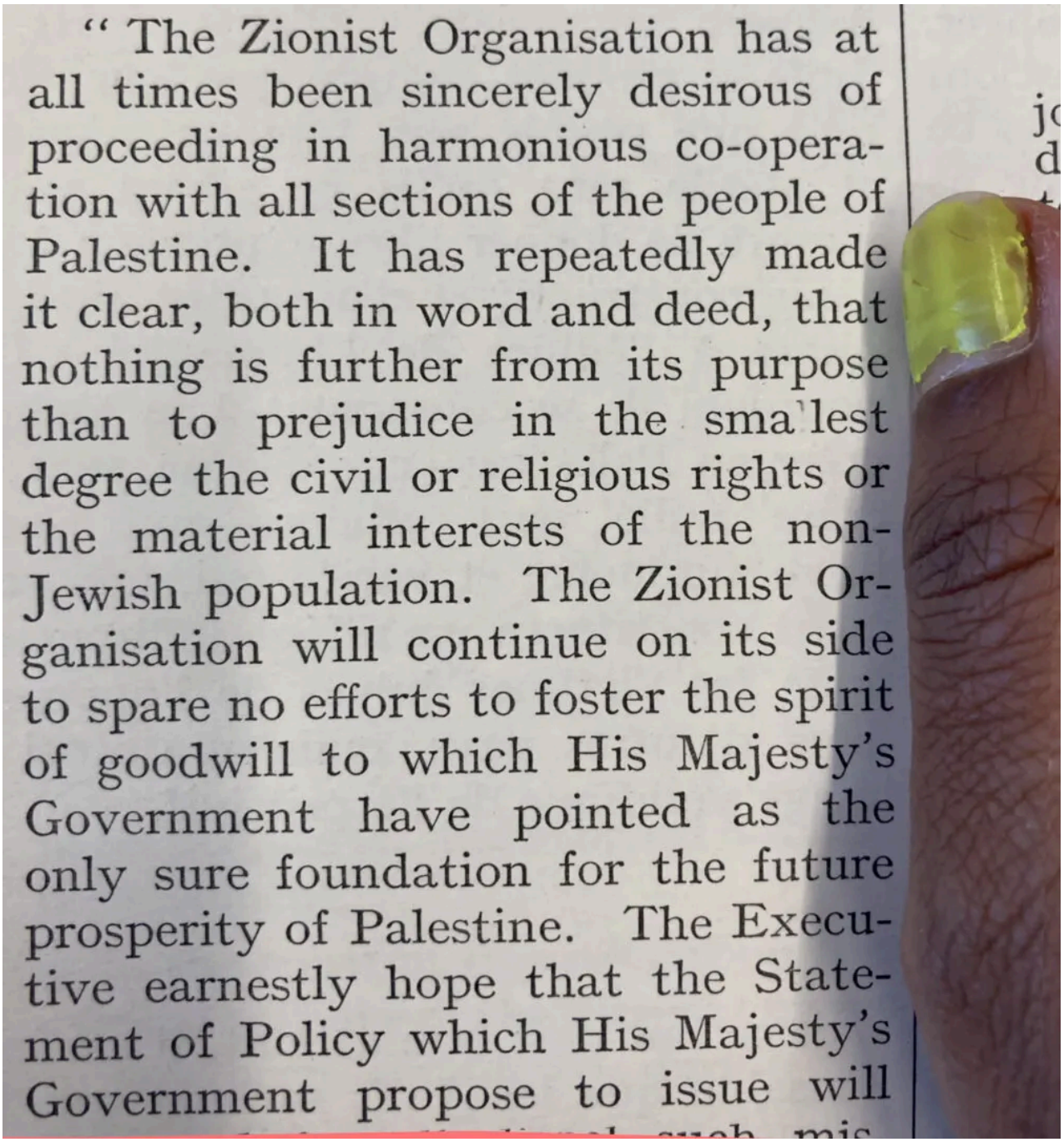
The experience of becoming a labelable body erases the complexities of the person and reduces them to symbols. Some embrace, cherish, and even monetize this "becoming symbol" process.[9] Others challenge it, question it, resist it, or disregard it. The latter would have a lower chance of survival in the art market. In the absence of official censorship, which I lived with in Iran, in the UK I feel the pressure, from art institutions and funders, to fill in the gaps they, and I, see in the healthcare system, immigration system, political system, economic system, education system, employment system, and social security system. And to live up to the image of a symbol—an expectation in which I happily fail.

For those who roam
For those who crossed
For those who resist
For the children touching rubble
For the peace killed every day, on every street
For the pomegranates of your cheeks

Where does the road take us
In what sea

To which port[10]

In 2021, I spent three months as resident artist at the archives of the United Nations Office at Geneva. My work was around absorbing and responding to the archive via the body. I mostly focused on the documents in the League of Nations archives on Palestine during the British Mandate time. Not conducting historical research per se but exposing myself to miles and piles of administrative documents and seeing how they would land on my body as I touched the papers, as I read words some of which I now assume to be lies.


" The Zionist Organisation has at all times been sincerely desirous of proceeding in harmonious co-operation with all sections of the people of Palestine. It has repeatedly made it clear, both in word and deed, that nothing is further from its purpose than to prejudice in the smallest degree the civil or religious rights or the material interests of the non-Jewish population. The Zionist Organisation will continue on its side to spare no efforts to foster the spirit of goodwill to which His Majesty's Government have pointed as the only sure foundation for the future prosperity of Palestine. The Executive earnestly hope that the Statement of Policy which His Majesty's Government propose to issue will

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/IMG_7375-copy.jpg>

Detail from "The Establishment in Palestine of the Jewish National Home: Memorandum Submitted by the Zionist Organisation to the Secretary General of the League of Nations for the Information of the Permanent Mandates Commission,
1924" as observed by the author. Document courtesy of the *United Nations Archives at Geneva*, photo by author.

I turn the pages. Day after day. Various correspondences with the Zionist organization.[11] Reports on colonization and farming.[12] Petitions. Letters. A newspaper celebrating the Jewish Palestine pavilion at the New York World's Fair (1939).[13] A letter with details of torture, murder, and bombardment of houses of Palestinians (1939).[14] Photos of UN buildings shelled in Suez city in the 60s,[15] a market in Gaza (1959),[16] a street view in the old city of Jerusalem (1978),[17] a girls' school in Gaza (1990).[18]

"The archive," writes Azoulay, "is first and foremost a regime that facilitates uprooting, deportation, coercion, and enslavement, as well as the looting of wealth, resources, and labour."[19] There, turning the pages and taking steps around the UN office, I wondered how I could allow all this well-documented imperialism, colonialism, propaganda, and what seems to me the failure of international law, to sink into my body—or seep out? How do I sit with evidence of systemic settler-colonialism?[20] Or how do I move with these?
The poem above is an excerpt from something I wrote mixing my words with the lyrics of favourite Palestinian songs I collected from my friends from Gaza and their mothers. I read the full text at a performance/intervention I did inside the UN office in Geneva—dancing, moving, walking around *Palais des Nations*. In the conference halls, meeting rooms, and corridors in between the making of significant political decisions, a camera person and I moved. Micro dances in a place where all body movements are prescribed by the institution. Where most people seem to be temporary acquaintances. Where huge X-ray machines and walls can pop up in a day in the middle of the hallway, change your route, and be gone the next day. This one-hour, semi-clandestine performance was broadcast live on Instagram.

In observance

Tara Fatehi

59:58

Recording of the livestreaming of a performative intervention at the United Nations Office at Geneva, November 29, 2021.

While I was at the UN, my friend Zahid from Gaza was staying at a UN camp on a Greek island awaiting an asylum decision. He told me about the hours and days he waited by the gate of the camp just to be let in. The violence of the inspectors. The mind games. The heart breaking state of the camp after a long and very difficult journey. "Tara habibti, I have so much to tell you. They took my clothes, my power bank, and told me that I should leave my phone or break its camera." He had chosen to break the camera. The image on our video call was bizarre, cracked, hazy, unrecognizable.

I stop here.

Breathe.

Change the subject.

My phone is flashing.

October 2023. A few notifications. "I have heard back from Mana, she is safe," "Athar is also safe, her house has been destroyed." "Zahid's house destroyed. Anbar's house destroyed." These are real people—I have changed their names—who had real homes which are now cavities in the earth.

November 2023. I hear that Zahid and other friends have lost up to 40–50 people each in their families. How is it that we can even say forty–fifty? When do we lose count? When do individuals stop to matter? When do they become a mass? And here I am, trying to memorialize this loss. And Christina Sharpe's questions echo in my head: "How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing? [...] how does one memorialize the everyday? How does one [...] 'come to terms with' (which usually means move past) ongoing and quotidian atrocity?"[21] Then I wonder how many more people will die in the duration of a peer-review process? How outdated are we by the time we all agree on every word to be published? Or do the continued repetitions of similar actions and the ongoing upholding of similar

structures—of oppression, colonization, annexation, and bombardment—render any concerns around the passing of time and further repetitions irrelevant and once again normalize “the situation”?

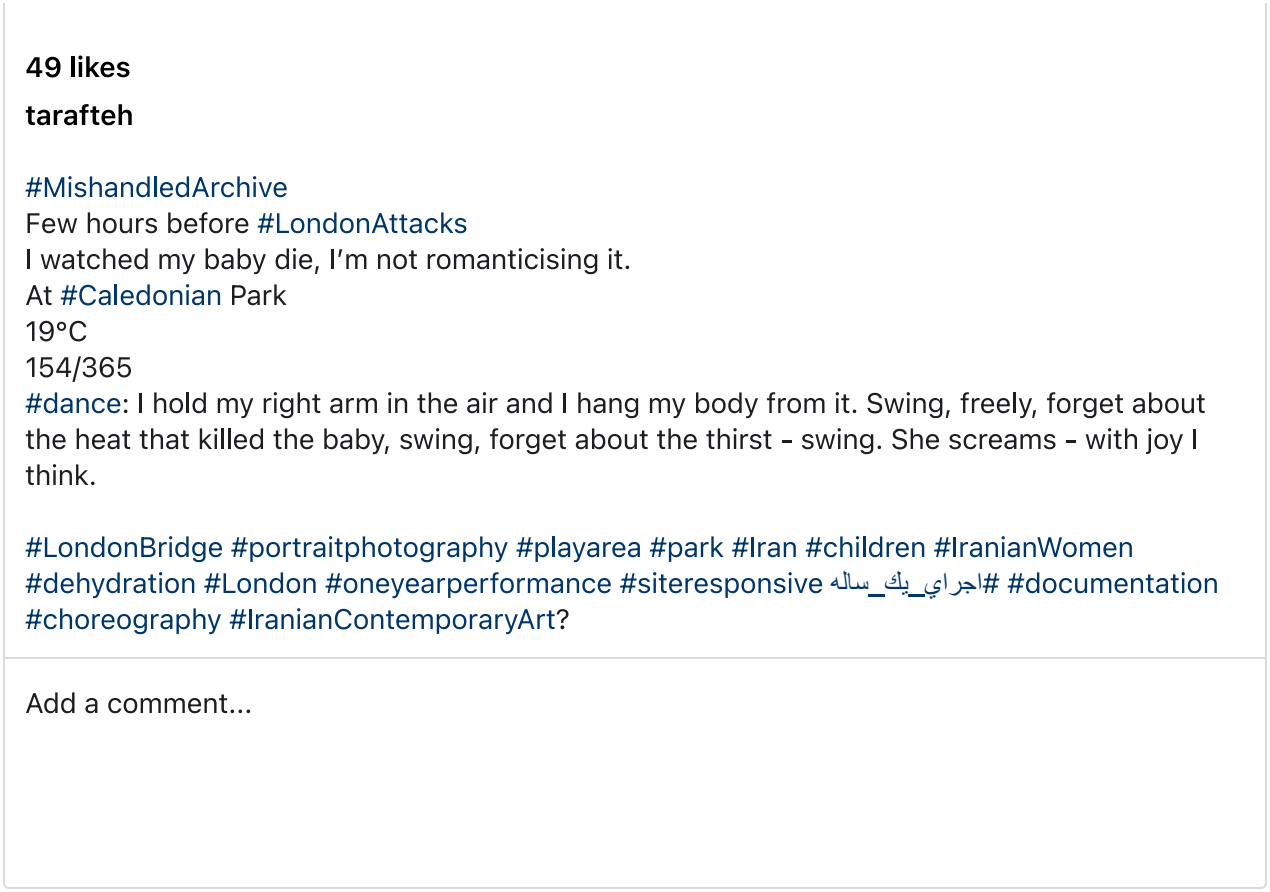
December 2023. I look at the photos of burnt documents and filing cabinets, broken shelves, a bombarded building, and read the news of the destruction of the central archive of Gaza municipality which was host to “thousands of historical documents.”[22]

Didn’t I say change the subject?

I change the subject. Grasses grow in abundance in Oklahoma. “Among the state’s 19 endangered or threatened species of wildlife in 2003 were three species of bat [...], bald eagle, whooping crane, black-capped vireo, red-cockaded woodpecker, Eskimo curlew, and Neosho madtom.”[23]

tarafteh
Caledonian Park
View profile

View more on Instagram


49 likes
tarafteh
#MishandledArchive
Few hours before #LondonAttacks
I watched my baby die, I'm not romanticising it.
At #Caledonian Park
19°C
154/365
#dance: I hold my right arm in the air and I hang my body from it. Swing, freely, forget about the heat that killed the baby, swing, forget about the thirst - swing. She screams - with joy I think.
#LondonBridge #portraitphotography #playarea #park #Iran #children #IranianWomen #dehydration #London #oneyearperformance #siteresponsive #اجراي_يك_ساله #documentation #choreography #IranianContemporaryArt?
Add a comment...

Instagram post on Day 154 of *Mishandled Archive*, June 4, 2017.

> *the rivers will flow again. swing.*
> *and the lizards will learn how to swim again. swing.*
> *and from hot ashes tall trees will grow. swing.*
> *and smiling women will throw flowers on their heads. swing.*
> *no mourning. swing.*
> *no pile of broken arms, legs, in the wasteland. swing*[24]

I invite the audience to swing. Hold their arm up, hang their body from it, and swing. The project is called *Mishandled Archive*. A year of dispersing family photos and documents in public places and making dances for each act of dispersal. Every day. 365 days. 2017. Later accumulating into one large scale performance, in theatres and outdoors, in parks.

“Forget about the heat that killed the baby, swing, forget about the thirst.”[25] Your arm lifts you up. Gravity pulls you down. A step to the left. A step to the right. The trees start to move. Muscles around the lips start to contract. Smiles start to appear. Other smiles start to appear. Bodies start to rearrange. One arm at a time. The landscape is rearranged, one body at a time. *No pile of broken arms, legs, in the wasteland*. The image of limbs, bodies, dust-covered hair, eyelashes, and clothes found in a mass grave in southern Tehran after a massacre of political prisoners in 1988 keeps coming forward in my vision.[26] I try to push it back. Swing.

On day 154 of *Mishandled Archive*, in a photo placed on a tree, a two dimensional woman, (dead?,) black and white, is looking at the children playing in the park decades after losing her daughter. Cause of death: dehydration. But we swing. We swing to move on. We swing to activate. We swing to turn loss into movement, into togetherness, into waves, into change, one limb at a time. A few hours, or a day later, this photo will fall. Or it will be taken by the wind, or a child. But in its momentary collision with some children in North London, it creates a new story to tell and a new way of telling the story of the woman running to find a doctor in the scorching sun for a child who will die soon. The loss generates connections and imaginations. The loss makes us move. Two decades after the 1988 massacre in Tehran, state sponsored bulldozers flattened parts of the cemetery, of the mass grave, for trees to be planted. To suppress the bones and the memories, to deny the past. They make a park *but I see a bulldozer*.

Notes

1. Tara Fatehi, excerpts from a poem written for and performed at *From the Lips to the Moon* (2023). ↩
2. Brian Osgood, Umut Uras, Zena Al Tahhan, and Farah Najjar, “Jenin Updates: Palestinian Deaths Rise, Israeli Raid Continuing,” *Aljazeera*, July 3, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2023/7/3/jenin-attack-live-israel-kills-eight-palestinians-tensions-high <

https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2023/7/3/jenin-attack-live-israel-kills-eight-palestinians-tensions-high> .

3. Maha Hussaini, "'Art Is a Form of Resistance': Israeli Air Strikes Destroy Gaza Cultural Centre," *Middle East Eye*, August 11, 2018, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/art-form-resistance-israeli-air-strikes-destroy-gaza-cultural-centre < https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/art-form-resistance-israeli-air-strikes-destroy-gaza-cultural-centre> .

4. For more on the expulsion of Palestinians see Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oneworld Publications, 2007).

5. Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (Continuum, 1999), 2.

6. Some of the UK universities that have cut or downsized art and humanities departments are University of Roehampton, Goldsmiths, Kent, East Anglia, and Queen Mary.

7. Tara Fatehi, excerpts from a poem written for and performed at *From the Lips to the Moon* (2023).

8. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (Indiana University Press, 1989), 16–17.

9. For example see Shohreh Shakoory's critique of the exhibition of the works of Shirin Neshat as a symbol of Iranian women during the Woman, Life , Freedom movement in Iran. Shohreh Shakoory, "Representation of Disobedient Bodies: A Critical Reading of Shirin Neshat's Visual Language," *NO NIIN Magazine* 16 (2023), https://no-niin.com/issue-16/representation-of-disobedient-bodies-a-critical-reading-of-shirin-neshats-visual-language/index.html < https://no-niin.com/issue-16/representation-of-disobedient-bodies-a-critical-reading-of-shirin-neshats-visual-language/index.html> .

10. Tara Fatehi, excerpts from a poem performed as part of In Observance (2021) a performative intervention at the United Nations Office at Geneva. The poem is a collage of Tara's words and the lyrics of a few Palestinian songs.

11. "The British Mandate for Palestine—Various Correspondence with the Zionist Organisation," *United Nations Library & Archives, Geneva*, 1924–1926, https://archives.ungeneva.org/the-british-mandate-for-palestine-various-correspondence-with-the-zionist-organization < https://archives.ungeneva.org/the-british-mandate-for-palestine-various-correspondence-with-the-zionist-organization> .

12. "The Establishment in Palestine of the Jewish National Home: Memorandum Submitted by the Zionist Organisation to the Secretary General of the League of Nations for the Information of the Permanent Mandates Commission," *United Nations Library & Archives, Geneva*, 1924, https://archives.ungeneva.org/the-establishment-in-palestine-of-the-jewish-national-home-memorandum-submitted-by-the-zionist-

organization < https://archives.ungeneva.org/the-establishment-in-palestine-of-the-jewish-national-home-memorandum-submitted-by-the-zionist-organization> .

13. *The Jewish Daily Forward*, June 4, 1939, United Nations Library & Archives, Geneva.

14. Jamal Husseini, "Letter to the President of the Permanent Mandates Commission, The League of Nations," in "Palestine – Protestations against the British White Book," *United Nations Library & Archives, Geneva*, 1939, https://archives.ungeneva.org/palestine-protestations-contre-le-livre-blanc-britannique < https://archives.ungeneva.org/palestine-protestations-contre-le-livre-blanc-britannique> .

15. "A view of OP MIKE in Suez City, 17 April 1973," photograph, UN Truce Supervision Organisation in Palestine (UNTSO), from United Nations Library & Archives, Geneva.

16. "A market in Gaza, April 1959," photograph, United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF), from United Nations Library & Archives, Geneva.

17. John Isaac, photographer, "Old City of Jerusalem, 12 April, 1978," photograph, from United Nations Library & Archives, Geneva.

18. John Isaac, photographer, "Girls' School in Gaza, December 1990," photograph, from United Nations LIbrary & Archives, Geneva.

19. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019), 169–70.

20. For a look at the use of the settler colonial analytic in Palestine, see "Israel's Illegal Occupation of Palestinian Territory, Tantamount to 'Settler-Colonialism': UN Expert," *UN News*, October 27, 2022, https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/10/1129942 < https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/10/1129942> ; and Brenna Bhandar and Rafeef Ziadah, "Acts and Omissions: Framing Settler Colonialism in Palestine Studies," *Jadaliyya*, January 14, 2016, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32857/Acts-and-Omissions-Framing-Settler-Colonialism-in-Palestine-Studies < https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32857/Acts-and-Omissions-Framing-Settler-Colonialism-in-Palestine-Studies> .

21. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 20.

22. Nadda Osman, "Israel-Palestine War: Israeli Forces Destroy Central Archive of Gaza City," *Middle East Eye*, December 7, 2023, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-israeli-forces-destroy-central-archive-gaza-city < https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-israeli-forces-destroy-central-archive-gaza-city> .

23. Read more on the flora and fauna of Oklahama at "Flora and Fauna—Oklahoma," *City-Data.com*, 2024, https://www.city-data.com/states/Oklahoma-Flora-and-fauna.html <

https://www.city-data.com/states/Oklahoma-Flora-and-fauna.html> . ↩

24. Tara Fatehi, excerpt from a text for the performance *Mishandled Archive* (2019). ↩

25. Tara Fatehi, *Mishandled Archive* (LADA, 2020), 97. ↩

26. For a history in Farsi and photographs of Khavaran cemetery, see Monireh Baradaran, "Tarikh-e Tasviriye Khavaran az 1360 ta Emrooz" {A visual history of Khavaran from 1981 to today}, *BBC*, May 3, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/persian/blog-viewpoints-61623750 < https://www.bbc.com/persian/blog-viewpoints-61623750> . ↩

Author Information

Tara Fatehi

Tara Fatehi is a performer, writer and multi-disciplinary artist based in London. Working across voice, movement, text and media, Tara's practice engages ambiguity, mistranslation, playfulness, disjunction, and unfinishedness. Tara is the co-founder of the music and poetry show *From the Lips to the Moon*. Her book *Mishandled Archive*, an account of her 365 days artwork, is published by LADA (2020). She has performed at V&A Museum, Southbank Centre, Nottdance, Sophiensæle and Royal Academy of Arts among others. Tara holds a PhD from University of Roehampton and teaches on performance, writing, theatre, and artistic research at various universities. She was the first-ever resident artist at the United Nations Archives at Geneva (2021).

View all of Tara Fatehi's articles.

Article details

Tara Fatehi, "Conscious Delirium of a Traveling Body: The Poetics and Politics of a Creative Practice," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.13

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Enlightenment by Any Other Name

by Patrick Michael Teed | Aporias, Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

ABSTRACT This essay provides a cursory sketch of the circulation of science as a fetish object in critical theory—particularly by way of an attention to the conceptual popularity of science studies and various permutations of object oriented ontologies. It does so to identify how and under what terms scientific knowledge becomes a necessary site of interdisciplinary collaboration with the humanities, and challenges how these interdisciplinary trafficks disguise forms of epistemic priority ceded to the (hard) scientific method. Identifying in this movement a disavowal of racism in science's conceptual repertoire and its ongoing claims to objective facticity, the essay criticizes contemporary recourse to science as the newest frontier in critical theoretical scholarship. In contrast to this, the essay poses a much more skeptical approach to the ethics and methods by which such projects develop and critically circulate.

KEYWORDS Black studies, critical theory, new materialism, science

> "The dialogue between philosophy and biology has not yet occurred."
>
> – Catherine Malabou (interview)

Critical theory has experienced a remarkedly *scientific* turn of late. Scientific not in the sense of an investment in or a return to an unflinchingly orthodox Marxism, but in the sense of a renewed interest in and attention to the discursive transposition of research from the hard sciences into humanitarian inquiry.[1] Indeed, in many iterations, this renewed interest takes the form of an assumed superiority of knowledge produced by way of its interdisciplinary movement, where the romance of a so-called science studies functions as a signifying extension of the Enlightenment romance of science itself.[2] Whether in the form of increased interest in neuroscientific turns toward plasticity,[3] computer science

and coding,[4] mathematics,[5] developmental systems biology,[6] quantum mechanics,[7] gut health and the microbiome,[8] environmental science,[9] or the postgenomic turn,[10] one might consider scientific research a new attachment for critical theoretical scholarship.

However, despite the ubiquity of this object choice, very few of these examples treat the facts produced through scientific truth procedures as objects of critique or even epistemic distance. Instead, they opt to carry the assumptions of these findings *into* critical theory, asking how doing so imposes new ontological frames for social and political consideration.[11] This uptake has embedded itself so profoundly within humanistic inquiry that it is difficult to take seriously Malabou's claim that "[t]he dialogue between philosophy and biology has not yet occurred,"[12] even if by the provocation she means an inability to surpass an ontoepistemological division between the categories as they are formed in their first analytic instance. However, given the resolute determination of effort, *if* the dialogue has not yet occurred, if the breach remains unyielding in its distance, it is certainly not for want of trying—let alone an absence of outputs that, at the very least, place the two alongside each other and in critical, generative conversation.

In many ways, the sheer scale of this attempt should be unsurprising. We are living, after all, in remarkably inter-, anti-, trans-, para-, and even meta-disciplinary times. Given the pleasure induced by way of an assumed disciplinary transgression,[13] could there be anything more provocative than transcending the most fundamental disciplinary impasse conditioning contemporary knowledge production? In this context, is suturing the gap between the hard and soft sciences not the most perfected realization of the dreams of interdisciplinarity? Of the imperative to think otherwise? How else could the uptake of an historically conservative epistemic domain, that of hard sciences and the epistemology of critical falsifiability, come to take the form of the most innovative and radical locus for political action? Wonderland's inversions loom.

A substantial bulwark of this turn in contemporary critical theory maintains a genealogical debt to new materialism and the much-maligned object-oriented ontologies (or OOO if you prefer its campy acronym).[14] Of course, raising OOO inexorably animates the specter of Jane Bennett,[15] a scholar whose influence on contemporary critical theory is, for better and worse, beyond the realm of question. Bennett, the preeminent theorist of this conjuncture, and her monolithic text *Vibrant Matter* have become a sort of shorthand for the new materialist turn, and all its political, social, and philosophical vicissitudes. While Bennett's work—with its shocking disregard for structural antagonisms especially around its treatment of race—in many ways begs its status as repository for relentless critique, continuing to focus on her text seems to both overstate, even reify, its contemporary relevance[16] and grab at all-too-low-hanging fruit. While the prolific nature of her work secures the need to repeat (and exhaust) the criticism, it also appears too often to take the form of a banal discursive strategy for overcoming the new materialist challenge without rigorously considering the scale of its thought.[17] If the force of new materiality is going to be taken seriously, both as a prompt to greater interrogation or a point of critique, it merits a richer examination than the infamous travails of a single scholar.

Bennett's work is, itself, indebted to the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour, although her insistence on the primary acting force of matter outside symbolic power seems, in many ways, to fundamentally misread the claims Latour is making. While Bennett has become canonized as the (in)famous scholar demanding we let things speak, a more attentive history returns us to a Latour prior to his politics of things (or *ding*,[18] if we take his resistance to translate the term seriously) and to the problematics that precipitated this focus—beginning from his identification of scientific objects as processes emergent through (rather than independent from) systems of social subjectivity.[19] We were, after all, never modern.

I raise the disavowal of Latour here not to rehash the lengthy genealogy of thought conditioning matter and science's contemporary purchase (this would take us down an all-too-long road including detours through Donna Haraway, Isabelle Stengers, Vinciane Despret, and Michel Serres), but rather to begin flagging just how dense and historically constituted this intellectual field is. The critical theoretical purchase of science is not so much a trend of the moment but an expression of a longer fixation on and interest in the problem of matter and its epistemic purchase. In this sense, the "scientific turn" might be nothing less than a symptom of the broader turn to materiality anew, another discursive reanimation of the desire to defeat and transcend the Kantian episteme without Hegelianism, through recourse to the crude facticity of empirical substance.[20]

But this desire to *let things speak* prompts a strange series of conclusions, perhaps because it cannot, at the end of the day, overcome and defeat Immanuel Kant in the way it wishes. As Tapji Garba makes clear in their excellent critique of the posthuman turn,[21] "without subscribing to a Kantian transcendental subject, the problem is that *a priori* categories . . . are left unanalyzed, and thus relied on uncritically."[22] This means that the kinds of category critiques necessary for rigorous humanities scholarship are abandoned in the interest of fetishizing scientific ontologies,[23] leaving us with only a reification of the pre-existing order. It would be enough if this were the only problem, but this emphasis on the material and ultimately uncritical uptake of the sciences leads to strange (and dangerous) conclusions about the broader structural state of things that more rigorous interrogations of the scientific might not so easily beget. For example, this romanticization markedly takes the form of what I call the eugenic discontinuity hypothesis, a belief in a break between the racial sciences of eugenics prior to 1940 and the humanist sciences of the post-war era. This hypothesis (although it is articulated as a kind of fact) is based on a historical approach that frames the post–World War II scientific imaginary as haunted by the genocidal impulses of Nazi race science.[24] In their desire to distance themselves from the Holocaust, biomedical scientists began a process of

rearticulating the universalist politics inherent to science in general and cellular and molecular medicine in specific.[25] And so, because the scientists themselves contend their science is opposed to racial eugenics, it must, as the critics seem to suppose, be so.

This is one component of the argument in Nikolas Rose's massively influential text *The Politics of Life Itself*, where he argues that the "styles of biological and biomedical thinking that inform ways of governing others and ourselves in the advanced liberal polities of the West are no longer those concerning the quality of the race."[26] Instead, he argues, the biopolitics of optimization organizing contemporary populations rupture race through their attention to the scale of molecularity and the molecular as the point of intervention. When attending to the literal uses of race as an organizing variable for medical research, Rose claims, through the transits of an almost unbelievable idealism, that race is merely a weak surrogate for ancestral biomedical aggregation.[27] The fact that some Black scientists invest in these forms of science (and non-scientists as a mechanism to identify ancestral history) means for Rose the work is necessarily detached from a racial structure of knowledge, and instead expresses a "biosociality and active biological citizenship."[28] On this reading, biological science is actively refigured as the site for an emancipatory vision of the human, a *humanistic biology*, one that sees in science a means to radically equalize and ultimately disappear race through its naturalization.[29] Black scientists who defend a racial-genetic basis for health are inversely figured as the reason for the ongoing turn to race science, and positioned as an alibi to disappear violence from the science of race they espouse. Within this theoretical system, race science literally becomes rearticulated as a new mode of agential citizenship, and the impulse to know oneself genetically is treated as a kind of given desire, rather than one constructed within a pre-existing symbolic field.[30]

Given his immense popularity, Rose's reductions are symptomatic of this general insistence on a turn to the crude fact of matter itself.[31] For this scholarship, the

attention to the materiality of the molecule means that race necessarily disappears because the molecular scale acts *outside* the racial episteme. Buttressed by an understanding of post-1945 biology as a departure from the racial structure of eugenics[32] and the avowal that its procedures can indeed ground a new humanism, material force of science is repositioned within its proper Enlightenment trajectory.[33] Biological humanism's desperate insistence to repudiate Nazism means, for these scholars, that the field of knowledge production, even as it returns to sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, evades a racial eugenic project. What is instead offered by the contemporary biopolitical regime is a *de*raced field of optimization that assumes a general theoretical disappearance of race from its auto-instituting epistemic infrastructures. Science becomes, for its ostensible critic, the vehicle for the realization of the promise of human development.

But, and here's the inconvenient snag, eugenics is not over. Its continuity remains structural to the very knowledge procedures that critical science theorists take on wholesale as points of entry into an unmitigated materiality. And so, to take the humanist scientist at their word—that they have overcome eugenics, and that their science scaffolds the possibility for a renewed anti-racist humanism—simply *because they say so* reflects a profoundly anti-intellectual betrayal of the project of critique. Whereas the social critics' historical duty is to interrogate the discrepancies between the narrativization of a science and the content of its epistemic procedures, under this new (materialist) theoretical framework, the supposed critic becomes scientism's most dogmatic alibi. Affirming the epistemological force of empiricism, the critical theorist of science secures and reproduces the conditions of eugenics precisely through its disavowal. The harmonization of methods between science and its critique obscures the fundamental incommensurability that should structure the terms of their relation. To accept without analysis the objects and categories of the hard sciences and thus to reify and assimilate them into humanitarian or critical humanist inquiry is to abdicate the role of the critical theorist in relation to both the science of

knowledge and the knowledge of science. In a humiliating reversal,[34] the critic performs their own self-abnegation, fantasizing the indignity of surrender as interdisciplinary entente.

Of course, science studies is not a monolith, and many within the field attempt to push against its more dominating trends. The eugenic discontinuity hypothesis stands in stark contrast to work operating within what Ruha Benjamin terms "critical race STS,"[35] a field operating at the intersection of science and technology studies and critical theories of race.[36] Against this trend toward theorizing the disappearance of race, scholars in this subfield consistently identify mechanisms through which race science is perpetually *reanimated* despite humanistic science's disavowal of a eugenic impulse.[37] When confronted with the claim that race science is an artifact of the (not so) distant past, critical race science and technology scholars excavate how, despite (and often *through*) this claim, race is rearticulated (even molecularized)[38] in our contemporary moment.[39] Taking the question of racial justice as a central and orienting problematic, critical race STS grounds its analysis in questions about the ongoingness of race science and the implications this holds for critical political projects invested in anti-racism.

This contrast designates one particular impasse between the ensemble of questions and debates animating contemporary (white) science studies and its critical race counterpart. While Benjamin is invested in "urging a sustained, field-wide commitment to incorporating critical race approaches in the study of science and technology,"[40] I am more interested in noting this aporia as symptomatic of a much deeper disciplinary fissure, one that cannot be so readily or easily recuperated.[41] Rather than assuming that what is needed for a more critical study of science and technology is the incorporation of Black critical theoretics into its conceptual arsenal, what I understand this fissure to be expressive of is an extant and ongoing antagonism, one that is constituted through the field's very formation. In some ways, this is to tarry with the possibility

that science studies is a foundationally white enterprise, a white conspiracy. Not simply a question of its historic and contemporary demographic makeup or the central analytics it is currently preoccupied with,[42] there is, built into its assumptive logics, a racialism that animates its enterprise.

The Dialogue Must (Not) Occur

I can't pretend that I haven't sometimes read many of these texts from a similar place of awe and pleasure. But as much as I enjoy examples of critical work happening within the field of science studies (I cannot discount the possibility that it is, perhaps, *because* I enjoy them),[43] I remain suspicious concerning their political stakes and the contexts animating their interventions—particularly of a material basis for politics grounded in knowledge generated through facts produced through the scientific method (and then transposed or applied by critical humanities scholars).[44] This assumption makes common cause with a racist, technofascist impulse, rather than a democratic one as it so often ostensibly articulates itself, and risks reinforcing a racial structure of knowledge predicated on the self-determining subject distanced from a radical exteriority.[45] It is one thing to debate the ontological transformations endemic to the discourse of science itself,[46] but quite another to pose that these transformations must then impose on humanities scholarship a concomitant transformation in the structure of its knowledge and its understanding of the human.[47] In the former move, an intellectual history of science operates on the terms of science as its explicit given, in the latter, science's understanding of a material real is reified by way of its importation into the humanities and the assumed leverage it has in problematizing the pre-existing conceptual arsenal. This is buttressed by an implicitly Enlightenment logic that the epistemological procedure of science inherently provides *progressively improved* knowledge that is neutral of idealist bias, an assumption revealed by the constant turn to modern breakthroughs as the conceptual tools inhering this positive transformative capacity.

To make the political and ethical stakes of my critique clear, by implying that humanities scholarship must give way to innovations in scientific theory, (hard) science is implicitly positioned as the more rigorous material enterprise of the two. This is supported by a second (but not secondary) belief that—because (hard) science provides a superior epistemological procedure for accessing material fact, because (hard) science is, indeed, the privileged point of methodological access to a material real—humanitarian scholarship should give way to and assimilate itself within (hard) science's epistemic formation. This is a two-fold maneuver, that both reifies the notion of an external, objective world, and concomitantly argues that access to it provides the primary methodological procedure for producing a truth claim.[48] The outcome of this maneuver is simple: that humanities must always cede to science epistemological priority. How are we to understand the demand for this convergence in the anti-intellectual context within which we currently reside? With what politics do they interface in a context where humanities are under attack for their insistence on the theoretical and the cultural as necessary objects of analytic attention? To ask these questions is not to flirt with anti-scientism (although there are conscientious objections to be made concerning its politics of expertise),[49] nor is it to demand a defense in toto of humanist scholarship,[50] but instead to point to the fascist epistemologies that are, to evoke George Jackson, already here,[51] the fascist epistemologies that seek to order our worlds through a social calculus inextricable from the promise of positivistic totality.[52] The desire for "the dialogue between biology and philosophy," as Malabou so aptly puts it,[53] seems inextricable from the broader epistemic terms conditioning our critiques, a context where anti-intellectualism often takes the form of crude defensive postures concerning the objectivity of science,[54] a context where various departments are shuttered by administrators for their lack of immediate workplace translatability, a context where the trafficking in of scientific research into critical modes of social and political theorizing seems indissoluble from the disappearance of humanities scholarship writ large that is structuring the desire for that movement in the first instance.[55]

Malabou's deferred convergence, the dialogue between science and philosophy that hasn't happened, but that, to her mind, must, is a dialogue that is not only already happening, but also is, in fact, repeatedly *made* to happen. It is the desire for this convergence, this repeated performance of ritualistic concession and the demand made therein, that is precisely the thing to ward against. This is not to ask for a renewal of forms of epistemic isolationism between the disciplines (did they ever really exist?), but to ask about the importance of politics quite literally in the strategic games of a broader cultural war.

In the wake of this dilemma, I am left with nothing but a series of pithy deconstructive questions:[56] Must we trust the science in critical theory, if trust becomes an index of its uncritical incorporation—or worse yet, its repositioning as the very engine of our conceptual development? What would it mean to resist the ontologies of scientific research as they inhere in critical theory's methods? Is such a move possible in our current conjuncture? Is it desirable? What is the object of the critic? What is a critical study of science and technology that takes for granted both of its core terms? Whence the split between biology and philosophy? And why the suture?

Perhaps I'm saying the dialogue must not happen, even if it is already ongoing, even if I am inexorably conscripted into it by the very nature of my refutation. As much as it pains me to say, I am *of*, not *in* it, after all.[57] But perhaps even this minor admission is an alibi, one attempting to ask as if I and we can position ourselves outside of an inheritance that conditions our arrival to position in the first instance: "For what might be necessary prior to the moment of a definitive refusal is to think both the essence (understood in its historicity) and the possibility of refusal as such."[58] What would remain of the humanities outside its desperate attempt to wash itself clean of the imperfections of its positivism, its shame over a subjective detritus marring the authorial strength of its claims? Is a self-inflicted ignominy the primary mark of difference between itself and its aspiration toward science? Is humiliation the only destiny for the critic?

Ironically, and contra the romance of scientism at play in the humanitarian act of surrender, what the hard sciences and humanities *share* is an inability to live up to the positivistic promise. The subject's epistemic debris always remains structural to claim. As neither fulfils Enlightenment's promise, both are bonded in their failure. Humanitarian scholarship's primary difference is the psycho-epistemic complex engendered by this failure, uniquely plagued as it is by a doubled insecurity. Unable to fulfil the promise of positivism, but also unable to dissimulate its failures like hard science, humanities has nothing left to it but a desperate attempt to simulate what is already simulation. As we live in the profoundly anti-intellectual wreckage of Enlightenment, it is difficult to know how best to negotiate this aporetic entanglement. Surely the uncritical embrace of science only further intensifies the dilemma, but so too does humanities' uncritical defense. And for this reason, until the dream to fulfill Enlightenment's positivism can be effectively disinherited, perhaps warding against the ritual performance of surrender, delineating the etiological foundations of this state of ruin, is the only task adequate to our current state of political triage. At the very least, and certainly for the science of theory (to say nothing of the theory of science), it is the only task worthy of criticism's name.

Notes

1. Although I shift between the language of humanitarian, humanities, and humanistic study, I tend to focus on "humanitarian" because of its connotations with the common good. While "humanities" seems to evoke more of a neutral field formation and "humanists" risks emphasizing a particular Renaissance intellectual movement (one that many contemporary antihumanist humanities scholars reject), "humanitarian" seems to effectively capture both the domain of study I am concerned with alongside its mandates to particular forms of moralistic intervention. ↩
2. Here I am thinking particularly of the work of Auguste Comte and its legacies. Comte argued that the production of knowledge develops along three stages: theological, metaphysical, and then positivistic. For Comte, positivism and its emphasis on strict sciences of empirical observation provided the apex of epistemological development. Comte's work is the inheritance of social theory, as his argument for a science of society provides a foundation for disciplinary sociology itself. ↩

3. Victoria Pitts-Taylor, *The Brain's Body: Neuroscience and Corporeal Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) ↩

4. Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 118 ↩

5. Denise Ferreira Da Silva "On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value," *e-Flux* 79 (2017), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94686/1-life-0-blackness-or-on-matter-beyond-the-equation-of-value < https://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94686/1-life-0-blackness-or-on-matter-beyond-the-equation-of-value> . ↩

6. Susan Oyama, *Evolution's Eye: A Systems View of the Biology-Culture Divide* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). ↩

7. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). ↩

8. Elizabeth Wilson, *Gut Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). ↩

9. Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021). ↩

10. Catherine Malabou, "One Life Only: Biological Resistance, Political Resistance," *Critical Inquiry* 42 (3): 429–38, https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/one_life_only < https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/one_life_only/> . ↩

11. One of the clearest exceptions to this romanticization is Ruha Benjamin's oeuvre, but most especially her emphasis on computerized and algorithmic forms of racism. Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Crow* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019). ↩

12. Catherine Malabou, "Interview with Catherine Malabou," in *Plastic Materialities: Politics, Legality, and Metamorphosis in the Work of Catherine Malabou* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 294. ↩

13. Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 80. ↩

14. For an elegant deconstructionist analysis of this inheritance, see Axelle Karera's "The Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics" (2019). ↩

15. Boo! ↩

16. To be clear, I do not wish to *understate* the significance of *Vibrant Matter* either. To the contrary, it remains perhaps the single most important text for crystallizing the new materialist intervention. However, in our present scholarly moment, its circulation most frequently takes the form of its critique—even by sympathetic scholars. Thus, rather than continuing to doggedly point to its limitations, I am interested in confronting the underlying discursive dynamics that rendered possible its composition. ↩

17. I have absolutely no interest in rehearsing the debates surrounding new materialism and hope my reader can agree that Bennett's monumental and influential status within critical theory is, at this point, (unfortunately) self-evident. A quick search of *Vibrant*

Matter in Google Scholar confirms the text's epicentral status. At the time of this writing it is just shy of 20,000 citations. ↩

18. Bruno Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik: Or How to Make Things Public," *Making Things Public-Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005). ↩

19. The early Bruno Latour, especially his co-authored work *Laboratory Life*, feels qualitatively distinct from the Latour in "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" While the early work is beset with its own issues, especially Latour's anthropological investment in alterity which cannot but help reproducing a fetishized epistemological pluralism disguised as constructivism, these problems are markedly distinct from the issues plaguing our contemporary conjuncture. ↩

20. By a defeat of the Kantian episteme, I mean the transcendental synthesis Kant offers that poses a kind of idealism as interwoven with the material—an idealism that ultimately becomes the condition for our access *to* the material. ↩

21. A turn that is symptomatic of the broader turn to materiality itself as the mechanism for a rigorous, humanitarian anti-humanism. ↩

22. Tapji Garba, "On Materialism, Freedom, and Self-Consciousness," *Philosophy Today* 67 (2023): 833–50, https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday2023104505 < https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday2023104505> . ↩

23. Annemarie Mol's *The Body Multiple* becomes such a clear and strange example of this when she argues that the methodological incommensurabilities of various cancer sciences index a distinct ontology of the body between them. For Mol, this distinct ontology is not operative at the level of discourse, but instead reflects differences in material character of the same body; thus, *the body multiple*. Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). ↩

24. This is captured by UNESCO's articulation of a "scientific humanism," envisioned by Joseph Needham and Julian Huxley, as a way of moving forward in the post WWII era. See Elena Aronova, "Studies of Science Before 'Science Studies': Cold War and the Politics of Science in the U.S., U.K., and U.S.S.R.," PhD diss., (University of California, San Diego, 2012). ↩

25. Aronova, "Studies," 45. ↩

26. Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 69 ↩

27. Rose, *Politics*, 185. The force of Garba's critique is made particularly visible here, but we might also ask, alongside Sexton, how the racial politics of HIV/AIDS and genomics both "share a common ground of concern at the molecular scale" (Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 236). Ultimately then, *against* Rose and *with* Sexton, we must ask "What is race, and where is race to be located in the body?" (Sexton, *Amalgamation*, 236). ↩

28. Rose, *Politics*, 176 ↩

29. Scholarship following in this theoretical vein, even when it attends to race, ultimately makes absurd conclusions about race's structural force and organizing power. This most often occurs through the reification of a crude understanding of biopolitics where conceptual conflations between race and disability lend themselves to a ruse of analogy and subsequent perverse claim that disability supplants race. ↩

30. Blackness, as the condition of possibility for racial differentiation, effectively grounds this new science of race. ↩

31. Both symptomatic but also, of course, an active and ongoing contributor. That is, while Rose of course contributes to the shape of this problem, his own intervention is conditioned by the broader epistemic history I am tracing. ↩

32. Maurizio Meloni, *Political Biology: Science and Social Values in Human Heredity from Eugenics to Epigenetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). ↩

33. Aranova's dissertation provides a particularly provocative reading of how history of science was always built into the Enlightenment project. See Note 23. ↩

34. And it *is* humiliating. ↩

35. Ruha Benjamin, "Catching Our Breath: Critical Race STS and the Carceral Imagination," *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* 2: 146, https://doi.org/10.17351/ests2016.70 < https://doi.org/10.17351/ests2016.70> . ↩

36. Other scholars, such as Moya Bailey and Whitney Peoples in their essay "Towards a Black Feminist Health Science Studies" have worked to explicitly focalize race in scholarship on science and health in the form of a kind of field forming call. (Moya Bailey and Whitney Peoples, "Towards a Black Feminist Health Science Studies," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 3 no. 2 (2017): 1–27, https://https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A561685864/AONE?u=anon~4df6c462&sid=googleScholar&xid=1288ec7d.) I focus on Benjamin's work here, however, for both its citational and conceptual currency, as well as its technoscientific breadth. ↩

37. Anne Pollock, "On the Suspended Sentences of the Scott Sisters: Mass Incarceration, Kidney Donation, and the Biopolitics of Race in the United States," *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 40 no. 2 (2015): 250–71, https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243914539569 < https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243914539569> . Brett St. Louis, "Race as Technology and the Carceral Methodologies of Molecular Racialization," *The British Journal of Sociology* 73 no. 1 (2022): 216–19, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12918 < https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12918> . ↩

38. Duana Fullwiley, "The Molecularization of Race: Institutionalizing Human Difference in Pharmacogenetics Practice," *Science as Culture* 16 no. 1: 1–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/09505430601180847 < https://doi.org/10.1080/09505430601180847> . ↩

39. Counter to the eugenic discontinuity hypothesis, there are myriad studies interrogating the interpenetration of coloniality with molecularity. See for key examples: Margarida Mendes, "Molecular Colonialism," https://www.anthropocene-curriculum.org/contribution/molecular-colonialism < https://www.anthropocene-curriculum.org/contribution/molecular-colonialism> (2017), and Michelle Murphy, "Against Population, Toward Alterlife," in *Making Kin Not Population* (Chicago: Prickly Press Paradigm, 2018), 101–24. ↩

40. Benjamin, "Catching," 146. ↩

41. I consider my project apposite to Benjamin's, a critical extension that seeks to identify just how profoundly STS must be deconstructed in order to respond to her demands. ↩

42. Things are undoubtedly quite dire when intersectionality is still a keyword that is unable to circulate with ease within the field (see Patrick R. Grzanka, Jenny Dyck Brian, and Rajani Bhatia, "Intersectionality and Science and Technology Studies," *Science, Technology, & Human Values* (2023), https://doi.org/10.1177/016224392312017 < https://doi.org/10.1177/016224392312017>). To be clear, I am not advocating for its appropriation by STS, but rather recognizing the almost shocking fact that science studies will not even participate in the, by now, broad-based antiBlack theft of intersectionality as a conceptual resource predicated on the assumption of its fungible conceptuality. See Sirma Bilge, "The Fungibility of Intersectionality: An Afropessimist Reading," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43(13) (2020): 2298–326, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1740289 < https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1740289> . ↩

43. Michel Serres and his text *Hermes*, especially is, in my opinion, woefully underread in our present moment. Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982). ↩

44. To clarify, this scholarship is not merely indicative of a capitulation to a positivist social science. More strangely, it is an investment in the positivism of science itself, which can then carry claims *into* the non-positivist, theoretical world of social thought. Perhaps generously read, a kind of epistemic symbiosis is what is on offer. ↩

45. Denise Ferreira Da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). ↩

46. This is really the core interest of a text like *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which was not interested in contending with these different epistemic ruptures as anything other than uniquely *scientific* discursive breaks that are no more inherently material than any other series of discourse[47. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions: Fourth Edition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012). ↩

47. For example, a burgeoning field of critical inquiry has relied on the fetishistic uptake of epigenetic and postgenomic research as a conceptual resource to retheorize the human. See: Evelyn Fox Keller, *The Mirage of a Space Between Nature and Nurture*

(Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Catherine Malabou, "One Life Only;" and Samantha Frost, "Ten Theses on the Subject of Biology and Politics: Conceptual, Methodological, and Biopolitical Considerations," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Biology and Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 897–924. ↩

48. To return to the strange uptake of science in feminist technoscience, while feminist STS scholars generally maintain a greater level of criticality, this often ends up, such as in the case of Mol, taking the form of a belief in *multiple* overlapping ontologies. Thus, the core assumption that science's epistemological apparatus accesses the real is reinforced through its displacement. ↩

49. Ruha Benjamin, "The Emperor's New Genes: Science, Public Policy, and the Lure of Objectivity," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 661 no. 1 (2015): 130–42, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716215587859 < https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716215587859> . ↩

50. Humanist scholarship, of course, has its own intimacies with racism—including the science of race through anthropology and travel writing. The humanist project of race always and already underwrites the science categorically. ↩

51. George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1990), 72. ↩

52. I hopefully need not rehearse the foundational critique laid out by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to draw out the connections between rationalism, positivism, and fascist preoccupations with technocracy. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). ↩

53. Malabou, "Interview," 294 ↩

54. Think here of the use of science to ground transphobia. ↩

55. This is obviously a recursive circuit. Humanists invest in science to protect the integrity of humanitarian inquiry, which then cedes epistemic priority to science and so structures the terms of humanities destruction. I suspect this is more unconsciously than consciously performed, an unnoticed compulsion responding to this interdisciplinary demand. ↩

56. We are, at the time of this writing, in a resurgence of the 1990s after all. ↩

57. In general, I find the defensive maneuver to say one is in but not of an institution rather tiresome (and thank you to the anonymous reviewer for also pointing out how it is insidiously Christian). ↩

58. Axelle Karera, "Paraontology: Interruption, Inheritance, or a Debt One Often Regrets," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 10 no. 2 (2022): 170, https://doi.org/10.5325/critphilrace.10.2.0158 < https://doi.org/10.5325/critphilrace.10.2.0158> . ↩

Author Information

Patrick Michael Teed

Patrick Teed is a PhD Candidate in the Social and Political Thought Programme at York University. Broadly speaking, his research projects focus on abolitionist theory, critical historiographies of racial slavery, anti-Blackness and settler-colonialism, and science and technology studies. His available essays can be found in *differences*, *CR: New Centennial Review*, *TOPIA*, *Lateral*, and *Rhizomes*. He is currently guest editing a special issue of *TOPIA* focusing on critical theoretical approaches to care and cure.

View all of Patrick Michael Teed's articles.

Article details

Patrick Michael Teed, "Enlightenment by Any Other Name," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.14

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Infrastructures of Transiency: On Cruise Ships

by Richard Simpson, Constance Dijkstra, Karla Hart, Luc Renaud, Francesca Savoldi and Andrew Culp | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024), Positions

ABSTRACT Cultural Studies Association's Environment, Space & Place Working Group Co-Chair Richard Simpson discusses the local, global, and transnational impact of cruise ships and the cruise ship industry with Constance Dijkstra, International Maritime Organization (IMO) policy manager for the advocacy group T & E, Karla Hart, co-founder of the Global Cruise Activist Network, and Luc Renaud, Associate Professor at the Department of Urban and Tourism Studies at the University of Quebec in Montreal. This podcast is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Francesca Savoldi.

KEYWORDS climate change, cruise ship, energy, infrastructure

Positions, Episode 4

Positions
Infrastructures of Transiency: On Cruise Ships

1x

00:00 / 00:54:22

Subscribe Share

RSS Feed

https://csalateral.org/fee

Share

< https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https://csalateral.org/podcast/infrastructures-of-transiency-on-cruise-ships/&t=Infrastructures of Transiency: On Cruise Ships> < https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=https://csalateral.org/podcast/infrastructures-of-transiency-on-cruise-ships/&url=Infrastructures of Transiency: On Cruise Ships> < https://episodes.castos.com/64727057b2ea96-07987659/1835177/c1e-wjk7rarqw4paj35g8-rk076x75iz9-o749vr.mp3>

Link

https://csalateral.org/poc

Embed

quote class="wp-

Download file < https://csalateral.org/podcast-download/13588/infrastructures-of-transiency-on-cruise-ships?ref=download> | Play in new window < https://csalateral.org/podcast-download/13588/infrastructures-of-transiency-on-cruise-ships?ref=new_window> | Duration: 00:54:22 | Recorded on September 15, 2024

Learning with *Infrastructures of Transiency: On Cruise Ships*

By Francesca Savoldi

This episode elaborates critical perspectives on the social and spatial phenomenon of “cruise ship cities,” defined by Dr. Richard Simpson as a new urban dynamic where the accumulation of spatial strategies are shaped by disproportionate tourism in which tourists outnumber residents.[1] The sense of “disproportion” is an emblem of the cruise industry: revenue distribution shows a massive discrepancy between the industry’s profit (with unclear amounts destined for tax havens) and economic benefits provided to port cities at destination. Most cruise lines employ workers from the global south to keep wages as low as possible, with challenging labor conditions. Ship sizes are also increasingly disproportionate; the capacity of the *Icon of the Seas*, a vessel launched in 2024, is almost ten thousand people. Such dimensions mean enormous environmental impacts—air pollutants, sewage, gray waters, and now even toxic water due to the use of scrubbers. These impacts require the adaptation of the seabed as well as port infrastructure.

In spite of port expansion being frequently enabled through public finance, they are difficult to control by democratic means, as a few large corporations dominate the industry and pressure port authorities to do what they want. The result is that the industry is reshaping the social and spatial geographies of port cities that host them, independently from the will of citizens or municipalities.

As Simpson argues, transience is a characteristic of cruise ship cities, as crowds of tourists outnumber residents leaving ghost towns when they leave. In effect, transience captures more comprehensively the temporality of the cruise economy rather than “acceleration”—a concept largely used for analyzing how capitalism shapes socio-spatial relations and everyday life. As in the polarizing rhythms of just-in-time global logistics, transience describes increasingly intense waves of circulation of customers and products, paced with apathetic phases. This new condition requires the constant adaptation of cities, workers, and ecologies to higher peaks of effort and stress.

This rhythm of pressure is reflected across the new dependencies that the cruise model enforces on cities, which most visibly expresses overtourism and overconsumption. In Venice for instance, the dependencies created by cruise ships and overtourism made the city vulnerable to economic downturns, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown. The renewed pressures of this industry on cities are recognizable through diseconomies and conflicts of resources with local communities. A striking example of this is the case of Barcelona, in which the 2022 drought made it necessary to establish a priority between providing water to the city or to the cruise ships (according to Garcia et al. 2020, one cruise passenger consumes 285.5 liters of water daily).[2]

As author featured in this podcast episode, Simpson unfolds all these critical issues via critical voices from academia, an NGO, and an international network of community activists. Such a panel of voices is rare in the analysis of the cruise industry and emphasizes the potential of building multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary narratives. As Simpson remarks, to characterize the impact of the cruise industry requires a range of specialisms that reaches beyond the capacity of environmental science or tourism studies. Beyond disciplinary perspectives, a characterization that takes into consideration the complexity and accumulative impacts of the cruise industry needs to center the direct experience of citizens, including their perception of risk related to their bodies and their territories.

Bringing in critical voices from differing contexts of knowledge production isn't only an exercise for deconstructing dominant narratives; it is also a grounding practice for thinking about the future away from sectorial interests. This exercise is crucial in the current conjuncture, in which geopolitical tensions influence patterns of circulation, the increasing frequency and severity of climate-related disasters highlight the urgent need of a paradigm shift, and tensions are mounting between activists in the street and institutions that are unable to face crisis. In this regard, the issue of pollution and energy transition in port cities and in the cruise industry is an urgent political and societal issue. The speakers remind us that

what is unique to cruise ships is their energy needs; they need energy to move thousands of passengers and to power the system of overconsumption they have onboard, which includes casinos, swimming pools, restaurants, etc.

In this regard, activist Karla Hart from the Global Cruise Activist Network highlights that after the pandemic, cruise activities have increased by roughly seventy percent—equivalent to fifty thousand flights between Paris and New York. The industry is getting bigger while it claims it is becoming "greener"—a paradox given that impacts cannot be dematerialized. On the one hand cruise corporations are adopting Liquified Natural Gas (LNG) and scrubbers, a format conversion that simply shifts the framing of pollution. In the United States, the export of LNG has doubled the climate impact of fracked gas used domestically.[3] Scrubbers are turning air pollutants into water pollutants.

On the other hand, cold ironing is presented as a second main alternative. Ports are investing in electrifying their infrastructure (expected to be through public finances), but are shipowners adapting their ships? And if they are, how will this energy be produced and sold? "It is like plugging in a city," Karla Hart says in this episode. NGO Transport and Environment has shown that an average of 210,795 households in the EU could be supplied with the volume of gas required to power the existing fleet of LNG-powered commercial ships today (29 cruise ships and 171 container ships).[4] That number could jump to an average of nearly seven million households in the EU by 2030 should there be no change to the EU legislative framework. Will this growing need of energy create a new conflict of resources between port and city? Will territories around ports have to submit to the production of energy to feed the industry? Will such needs push energy transition towards nuclear energy?

The search for energy security has become a crucial driver of political tensions and necropolitics, i.e. Europe's plan to wean off Russian gas following the invasion of Ukraine, and Israel awarding offshore gas licenses while conducting a genocide

in Gaza. With increased energy consumption and accelerating climate crisis, we will have to establish new priorities. In this sense the cruise industry and its growing energy needs should be far from being a social and economic priority; as Dr. Luc Renaud remarks at the end of the episode, there are many other and more sustainable ways of doing tourism.

In 2023, six out of nine planetary boundaries have been crossed according to the Stockholm Resilience Centre, indicating the urgent need of a paradigm shift.[5] Organized citizens from diverse port cities are already developing alternative scenarios, structuring alliances, and conducting direct actions and debates. They are building potential to influence policy and societal dynamics. Academics must choose what role they want to play. As Gramsci highlighted, traditional intellectuals have a lot to learn from organic-intellectual campaigners' challenges to power. Transdisciplinary alliances based on transmission of knowledge can generate enthusiasm, sparking multidimensional learning. At the same time, analyzing real-world challenges together with students can shape very useful tactics. As critical educators Paulo Freire and bell hooks have taught us, the classroom is a political space that connects the personal with the political, and which can catalyze social change. Richard Simpson's critical pedagogical practice mentioned in the podcast episode is a very good example of how focusing on the cruise industry in the classroom can produce critical thinking and tactics for understanding how space and relations are produced in this era of port cities.

Bio

Francesca Savoldi is a human geographer (PhD) concerned with the dimensions of power, politics, space and place in coastal and maritime areas. Her most recent work has focused on the urban geography and political ecology of port cities and coastal territories. As a Marie Skłodovska-Curie postdoctoral fellow at Delft University of Technology (2021–2023) she has critically examined the evolution of the port-city relationship, its contemporary power imbalances, and related

contested spaces and relationalities. She is the founder of ContestedPorts.com < https://www.contestedports.com/> , an online platform dedicated to social mobilizations in port cities.

As a member of the Jean Monnet Chair in EU Integrated Maritime Policy, Francesca has previously investigated the ongoing transformation of maritime spaces, economies, and politics. She has also conducted research on different types of urban conflicts, as well as citizen sciences. Currently, she is a lecturer at the Glasgow Caledonian University, visiting researcher at Erasmus and TU Delft universities, and postdoctoral research fellow at Cà Foscari University.

Audio Transcript

[00:00:00] **Andrew Culp:** Welcome to Positions, the podcast of the Cultural Studies Association, sponsored and published through the open source journal *Lateral*. Positions aims to provide critical reflection and examination on topics in cultural studies for scholars, students, and a general audience. Make sure to follow CSA and *Lateral* journal on socials, and subscribe to our podcast to keep up with new episodes.

[00:00:27] **Rich Simpson:** Hello and welcome everyone. I'm Rich Simpson, and I'm a visiting assistant professor in the English department at the University of South Florida. Today we're talking about the cruise ship industry, its impact on the environment, and its immense territorial power within coastal cities around the world.

[00:00:45] These developments are provoking a growing number of intense clashes between multinational corporations and local communities. And in this episode, our aim is to bring awareness to the unique complexities of this tension, as well as the different ways in which organizations work toward this industry's reform or complete transformation.

[00:01:05] To characterize the effects of the cruise industry requires a range of specialization that reaches beyond the capacities of environmental science or tourism studies. My own research addresses the urban impact of the cruise ships, and I use critical geography, narrative analysis, and regional studies to examine the way the ships completely transformed Juneau, Alaska from 2014 to 2020.

[00:01:31] In that essay, I introduced the concept of the cruise ship city to name the new urban dynamics uniquely defining communities where the inflow of seasonal tourists annually outnumbers the local resident population. Cruise ship cities yield much of their urban and oceanic landscape to accommodate an infrastructure of transiency in the form of both mega vessels and millions of people. All for economic, educative, and entertainment purposes that only marginally benefit [00:02:00] the local community. In response to this process, I developed a pedagogical practice unique to the cruise ship city that helps my students identify and reconfigure its material, its discursive, and its lived experiences.

[00:02:16] Building on that teaching practice, I'm now developing a participatory digital mapping of cruise ship cities. And if you live in one, or conduct research on the ships, please get in touch. This map is one part of a growing international classroom connecting people who live in cruise ship cities and establishing a comparative approach to the way these ships impose urban strategies that demand new forms of critical study and resistance.

[00:02:44] The goal of this mapping project is to build a much needed global exchange that can collectively address how the cruise industry intertwines human experience, urban development, global economies, and ecological transformations around the world. So for this episode, I invited three people whose work organizes different responses to challenge the global practices of the cruise industry.

[00:03:09] One is a European policy campaigner, one is a Canadian geographer, and one an American activist. While each of them advocate to reduce the impact of the ships, they differ on how to go about that process and on how they understand what is or isn't possible. I'm delighted to have each of them with me today.

[00:03:32] Let's begin by having everyone introduce themselves.

[00:03:35] **Constance Dijkstra:** So I'm Constance Dijkstra, I work as a shipping campaigner for Transport & Environment, which is a climate organization based in Brussels, where we campaign for clean transport solutions.

[00:03:49] **Luc Renaud:** I am Luc Renaud, I'm an assistant professor at the University of Quebec in Montreal.

[00:03:55] I work at the Tourism and Urban Studies department, and I'm also part of a research group called Tourism Territory, a society research and intervention group. We work on a very critical standpoint towards tourism, so I'm glad to be here.

[00:04:15] **Karla Hart:** Thank you, Rich. My name is Karla Hart and I'm with the Global Cruise Activist Network.

[00:04:20] I'm in Juneau, Alaska, where I'm also a community activist and I serve as coordinator of the Global Cruise Activist Network.

[00:04:29] **Rich Simpson:** Excellent. Thank you everyone and welcome. Constance, I'd like to begin with a few questions for you. Your organization develops policy regarding shipping, yet you've also written one of the most important studies we have on the environmental impact of the cruise ship in Europe.

[00:04:43] Can you tell us a little bit about what Transport & Environment does and describe some of the findings from that report?

[00:04:49] **Constance Dijkstra:** Yeah, sure. So thank you so much for having me. Um, so we published recently a study that looked at the amount of air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions that cruise ships emitted in Europe in 2019 and 2022.

[00:05:09] And our objective was to understand whether the pandemic had impacted the activities of cruise ships, and evaluate whether these types of vessels were polluting more or less than before the pandemic. And so what we found out is that the number of cruise ships, the time they spent around ports, and the fuel they consumed all increased by about a quarter.

[00:05:40] And this has resulted in an increase in sulfur oxide emissions, in nitrogen oxides emissions, in particulate matter emissions, which are all air pollutants that are linked to various illnesses that can affect people, especially respiratory or cardiovascular diseases. When it comes to climate change, we found out that CO2 emissions increased by nearly 17%.

[00:06:07] And, you know, CO2 emissions account for the vast majority of the global warming from cruise ships. It's roughly the equivalent of about fifty thousand flights between Paris and New York. That's just to give you kind of like a concrete example. What also we noticed is that, for example, methane emissions were multiplied by five.

[00:06:29] And this can be explained by the fact that more and more cruise ships are powered with a new type of fuel in the market, which is liquefied natural gas. And when you use liquefied natural gas as a marine fuel, there are some leaks from the engine, which generate methane into the air. One thing that we have not looked at too much is the impact of the cruise ship industry on biodiversity or on nature, but it's obviously something that is worth looking into. You know, in 2005, we had about 359 cruise ships globally.

[00:07:06] And in 2020, we end up with 461 cruise ships. Okay. And to give you an idea in terms of like, sizes. Since 2009, we have been building cruise ships that can accommodate between five thousand to six thousand passengers on board. Whereas if you look at the cruise ships that were built before 2000, the maximum capacity of the largest liners was between three thousand to four thousand passengers.

[00:07:34] **Rich Simpson:** So the capacity of each vessel has nearly doubled, and we now have over a hundred more of these larger ships in global circulation than we did in 2005. Yeah, the growth in this industry is substantial and perpetual over the last two decades. So what kind of research is Transport & Environment now conducting?

[00:07:50] And what kind of research does your organization need to develop regulations?

[00:07:54] **Constance Dijkstra:** There've been a number of pieces that look at the pollution from the shipping industry and the cruise ship industry, notably on the health impact that this industry can have on, on people who live, you know, close to the ports or alongside the coast.

[00:08:08] One issue is that many of those studies have been conducted in European waters. And so we have less information on the impact of cruise ships in other world regions. I think another challenge is that it's quite challenging to ascertain whether the pollution that is being emitted comes from cruise ships as opposed to other ship types.

[00:08:30] Obviously, it is possible in some cities that welcome many cruise ships. But it's sometimes challenging to exactly differentiate that in big cities where there are going to be other types of vessels, such as, you know, container ships or ships that transport things like sand. I think in terms of research needs, I

think it's always good to have research that looks at the impact of local and world regional regulation on shipping.

[00:09:03] That's always quite interesting because I think research can show that you don't necessarily always have to go through the International Maritime Organization to regulate the impact of ships, including cruise ships. Another element that is worth to look at is to really have some strong research on all the solutions that are being put forward by the shipping industry, including cruise ships.

[00:09:29] So, for example, I mean, I mentioned that there are more and more cruise ships that are powered with liquefied natural gas, but you know, the amount of methane that is being emitted by those ships is really up for debate. And so having some really good independent research on that would be really, really helpful and it would be really helpful to understand the exact climate impact of those type of vessels.

[00:09:51] But you could also have some more research on other solutions that are being put forward, like scrubbers, for example, which are generally used to prevent sulfur from being emitted in the air, but that can result in polluted water as a result. So, this type of research, I think, is also quite useful.

[00:10:12] **Rich Simpson:** Yeah, the cruise industry introduced scrubbers as a new form of green technology if they emit enormous amounts of pollution directly to the ocean. Karla, could you give listeners some background on how the scrubbers came about and how they work exactly?

[00:10:26] **Karla Hart:** The International Maritime Organization adopted rules that banned the sulfur content in the discharge. They restricted the sulfur content in discharge, thinking that in making this restriction that it would end the burning of heavy fuel oil. Technology was brought in called an exhaust gas cleaning system,

which takes water and sprays it into the emissions and captures the sulfur and some of the heavy metals and polyaromatic hydrocarbons.

[00:11:00] So, they're spraying seawater into the exhaust system of the cruise ship, capturing toxins, and then discharging them into the ocean. So, as they cruise, whenever they're burning heavy fuel oil, whether at dock or underway, they're discharging hot, acidic, heavy metal laden, polyaromatic hydrocarbon laden waste into the waters.

[00:11:24] And with very few exceptions, they're allowed to discharge that pretty much anywhere because it got slipped in and folks weren't paying attention.

[00:11:33] **Rich Simpson:** The ecological impacts of the ship requires looking not only at its atmospheric pollutants, but its oceanic ones as well. It causes these research needs that you mentioned.

[00:11:42] Research on health impacts in coastal cities of biodiversity, research on the methane emissions of liquefied natural gas. And regional regulations on shipping that have been attained outside of the island. Point us towards some of the crucial aspects of this industry that now demand our attention. But I want to circle back to another point that [00:12:00] can help us to contextualize this issue.

[00:12:02] The cruise ship, in fact, accounts for a very small percentage of shipping in Europe. So can you tell us how the cruise industry stands in relation to other kinds of ocean transport? Is there something unique about the cruise ship within the shipping world? And how does that uniqueness serve Transport & Environment's work to regulate shipping at large?

[00:12:19] **Constance Dijkstra:** When we look at the overall climate impact of the shipping industry in Europe, it's true that cruise ships in comparison to other ship types, you know, they emit less emission in the sense that they arrive in seventh position in our ranking in terms of different ship types. Overall, they emit less

emissions than ferries, less emission than tankers, and far, far less emissions than container ships.

[00:12:46] But I think it's important to understand that we're not exactly working with the same order of magnitude. You know, for example, in 2022, we recorded the emissions of more than 1,800 container ships. Whereas in our study, we look at the container ships of 280 cruise ships. I think perhaps, another thing to kind of, you asked what exactly is unique about cruise ships, and I think it will come as no surprise that it's obviously their energy needs, which are very, very different from those of a container ship or a ship that transport sand or grains.

[00:13:20] Cruise ship needs a lot of energy because they need to power swimming pools. They need to power an entire hotel infrastructure to cater to the needs of thousands of passengers. But I think also all the things that kind of sets the cruise ship industry apart from other shipping sectors is that these vessels tend to navigate closer to coast and they stay at a port all day long.

[00:13:49] In some cases that port is really in the city center and then they move every day to another port. In some cases, especially when it's a small port, there isn't always shore-side electricity. And so that means that a cruise ship is not going to be able to connect to the electricity at the port. And that's quite a problem because as a result, it's going to be relying on its engines and burn fuel at the port in order to sustain all its activities on board.

[00:14:22] That's quite problematic.

[00:14:25] **Luc Renaud:** I want to add also that those ships are traveling for no really good reason at all. That our transporting mentioned that it's for leisure only. So there's other ways to do leisure, but I just want to point out that there's no really good reason for those ships to go around and to pollute.

[00:14:45] So it's just, you know, transporting grain to feed people and transporting people to feed the cruise companies, it's different thing. But question I have to confess is that, um, how do you manage to get all those numbers? Because the problem with cruise [00:15:00] industry is the lack of transparency. Uh, you talked about independent research.

[00:15:05] But it's very difficult for scholars to ask those questions or have the real numbers. And when, when we go out with some studies, they just say, well, that's not the real numbers. But at the same time, they don't want to share the real numbers with us because, you know, it's strategic information for them.

[00:15:21] So, we would have to check every boat that comes in Canada, check the type of boat and see how much emission they, I don't know, it would be very complicated if we don't have the collaboration of those companies and the government. So, I wonder how you managed to get all that information and put out all those numbers.

[00:15:40] **Constance Dijkstra:** We were able to undertake this study by selecting cruise ships. By relying on a database called Clarkson. And then we looked at the trajectories of all those vessels in Europe. Then we looked at the technical specificities of those vessels, and we looked at the fuel [00:16:00] consumption. And then we looked at emission values from the International Maritime Organization.

[00:16:09] And it is through those emission values that we were able to exactly understand how much, you know, air pollution was being emitted. But you have to agree that this was a huge amount of work and that we had to establish a model in order to do so, but I think it's also important to understand that it's not as if we started from scratch.

[00:16:32] We had originally published another study on cruise ships air pollution. And so we basically updated our number, but we already had that model in place.

So that's also why we were able to do it quite quickly, but it was a huge amount of work, and it did require us to actually buy AIS data. And I was going to say, you mentioned a really, really interesting point related to the transparency and the [00:17:03] lack of transparency that we have, and I think it's really important to keep in mind that in order to really understand the climate impact of just of cruise ships, but also shipping as a whole, you need to have a good starting point. And that does mean that either as a region at a world regional level or at a national [00:17:29] level, you need to monitor shipping emissions. We need to understand, you know, how much emissions are being emitted annually. How much of those, how much air pollution is being emitted, you know, at a port, for example, what is exactly the type of fuel consumption. So in Europe, we have a monitoring, reporting, and verification system, which is compelling ships, for example, to report on an annual basis [00:17:55] their fuel consumption, their CO2 emissions, [00:18:00] and this was the starting point to regulate basically the shipping industry. Because once you have that information. You then know exactly what can be regulated, what needs to be regulated, who emits the most, but you do need that basis to begin with. But yeah, I will agree that it's not always easy to obtain data from the shipping industry.

[00:18:25] I think that if you are working in a climate organization, it's even more difficult.

[00:18:32] **Luc Renaud:** No, I'm not surprised. Like, it's not a lack of transparency, no transparency at all. Like, as soon as you are in a position that you want to check out what's happening, what's the deal with any kind [of] cruise tourism, it's always the door shut.

[00:18:49] You know, they always shut the door because they don't want to talk to you. They don't want to talk to me. They won't talk to Karla, probably. Like, it's all a bully industry. Or to make it in a polite way, you know.

[00:19:01] **Rich Simpson:** Absolutely. And this is why collaboration at an international, regional, and local level becomes so important.

[00:19:07] Constance, I know Transport & Environment focuses on Europe, but I wonder if you can tell us about the challenges that you face when you begin to work at an international scale.

[00:19:15] **Constance Dijkstra:** Yeah, it's true that at Transport & Environment, we, we really put our, our political capital at the EU level. And the reason for that is that it's really, really difficult to work at an international level.

[00:19:27] And by international level, I mean, it's really challenging to change the system through the International Maritime Organization. So the International Maritime Organization is a UN organization, which is notoriously known for being difficult to lobby, especially when it comes to climate related measures.

[00:19:46] To give you an idea, you know, the new objective is to reach net zero around 2050 and to strive for 30 percent emission reduction by 2030 and 80 percent reduction by 2040. And I think if you're someone who is not involved directly in the debate, you know, these objectives might appear really, really positive and, and they're all better than what we had before.

[00:20:11] That's for sure. But these objectives are non-binding. They're just aspirational objectives, and they can only be achieved if the International Maritime Organization adopts mandatory and clear regulatory measures, which is going to be really, really tough. What I mean is that, you know, technology is not, like, really the problem here.

[00:20:37] We have studies that show that you could slash shipping emissions through various energy efficiency measures, through, I don't know, wind-assisted technologies, for example, by using green fuels. But the challenge is really a

political one. At the IMO, there are 175 member states with different economic and climate strategic interests.

[00:21:05] And this situation is forcing ambitious nations to lower their climate standards in order to reach an agreement that is going to represent the lowest common denominator. We have some developing countries that are worried about the impact of rules, such as a global price on carbon emissions. You know, these countries are worried because they're at the end of long lines of communications.

[00:21:36] So these countries can be, for example, Brazil or Argentina. And so what I mean is that because it is going to be very tough for the International Maritime Organization to set up clear and strict rules. They will need to be complemented at the national or the European level to basically fill the gap that will be left at the IMO level.

[00:22:03] **Rich Simpson:** I think it's a crucial point here that the challenge is not developing new greener technologies, but rather finding political agreement among IMO members. And so the IMO's tendency toward that least common denominator makes regional and national organizing around this issue absolutely necessary. Can you tell us what collaborations among NGOs around the world looks like right now?

[00:22:26] **Constance Dijkstra:** I think we already are quite good as NGOs who are based all around the world to share information. Like we do have a number of coalitions of different groups where we always try to stay on top of it. I think sometimes that the issue is that because the shipping industry is so big, because there are so many different economic interests, so many different type of business models, it's hard to keep up with all ship types.

[00:22:54] So I think sometimes it's, I mean, for example, Karno focuses more on cruise ships, that, that makes sense, [00:23:00] but some of us, you know, focus

also a lot on container ships. Which is a whole different type of business, so it's also hard to keep up with developments in the maritime sector overall.

[00:23:13] I think also one thing that makes it challenging is the fact that you need a strong knowledge basis on many different sectors. You know, we're talking about the energy transition, we're talking about climate change. We're talking also on things like how a ship engine works, for example. We're talking sometimes on, you know, technical specificities or certain fuels.

[00:23:36] These are not topics that are easy to master and to also provide a very critical analysis. And I think sometimes that's also what allows the shipping industry to kind of not be too transparent because their excuse is, it's complicated and you can't understand.

[00:23:54] **Rich Simpson:** So there is this need to broaden our approach to the maritime sector.

[00:23:58] To see cruise ships as one [00:24:00] segment of a much larger industry of business models. And then there's this other issue of needing a strong understanding of different kinds of knowledge in order to make critical analysis a possibility. I think this is another place where regional organizing and activism becomes vital as they present different approaches to developing interventions into this industry.

[00:24:19] Luc and Karla, can you share some of the local responses to the cruise industry at the scale of the city or grassroots?

[00:24:26] **Luc Renaud:** I'm not very optimistic about all the climate and emission regulation, and taking for a fact that the industry is booming, getting better and bigger and bigger, and the advance they make by reducing their emission, like with technological stuff and everything, it's like the aviation industry. They say

we're going to cut off at 20 percent of our emission in 2030, but they're going to grow from up to 40, 50 percent more passengers.

[00:24:56] So the gains they're doing on one side are cut off by the tension of the industry. And I'm, I'm not saying that there's nothing good there, but it's a lot of discourse of getting greener, but at the same time getting bigger. So I don't know about being optimistic about goals for 2030 or 2040.

[00:25:18] We tend to think that cruise ships companies are very powerful, but that's what I tried to show in my paper in 2020. Tell people that, in fact, the cruise companies, they need more of the destination and the community than the other way around. And there's a lot of arguments for this.

[00:25:39] In the pandemic time, we saw that the cruise ships were not able to move. And for them, it was just a nightmare, you know, they need to move, they need to go to destination. And most of the destinations, they internalize the discourse of the cruise company that we need the cruise companies because it's going to be good for the destination, it's going to be [00:26:00] good for the economy, it's going to be good for a lot of things, but it's not true.

[00:26:04] And if you look at the numbers, economical benefits of cruise company are quite marginal if you compare them to overnight tourism or the rest of the tourism industry. I'm not talking about Serbian destination where cruise companies or cruise tourism is very important. But I'm talking about all the other destinations where you have both overnight tourism and cruise tourism.

[00:26:25] And it's beginning to understand that it's not that important to have cruise tourism. The numbers are there and it shows that cruise tourism can disappear from a lot of destinations and it won't change anything for the old picture of the tourist industry. So knowing that, we add that labor to say, well, to impose transparency, to force the companies to be accountable.

[00:26:50] And to impose new regulation and things like that. I think that as a community, we're able to say, we should be able to say that if you [00:27:00] come to our nation, you should comply to certain types of regulation and put some resistance against those groups, companies, because I'm sure that a lot of this nation, they don't need cruise tourism to survive as a tourist industry. So there's a stiff, I think, of power relationship here after the pandemic. And we should be more vocal about that and say to the destination. And that's what I'm trying to say with my work and the conference I'm giving. And when I speak to [a] person from a tourism association, that's the kind of the discourse I'm trying to put in front, because we have more power than they have, I'm sure.

[00:27:39] But right now, or since the beginning of cruise tourism in the 80s, in the 90s, when they started to be bigger, we always felt that we should do the best to make them come to our destination and, and, and then we should change that.

[00:27:55] **Constance Dijkstra:** I do think that the destinations are absolutely crucial for cruise ship companies.

[00:28:02] We have seen some cities in Europe restrict quite a lot, the activities of cruise ships, or even in some cases sort of like banning them from their cities. And I completely understand that, that reaction. The difficulty is, you know, how, how do you make sure that if you're banning your cruise, it doesn't go to the port next door.

[00:28:25] And that's a bit the issue that we see sometimes is that, well, for example, in Venice, it's a lot harder at the moment to dock for a big cruise ship, but we have seen those ships basically go to neighboring cities. And so sometimes that's also difficulty with going against cruise ship is, you know, how do you make sure that this is a coordinated effort at a local level?

[00:28:48] How do you make sure that cities are prepared? To what extent are you willing also to make concessions to allow perhaps some cruise ships, not

some cruise ships? I mean, at T&E, you know, we, we're [00:29:00] not, we're not against cruise ships. Like we, we never said let's ban cruise ships, but these are questions, you know, that we think about.

[00:29:08] **Karla Hart:** We struggle with that within our activist group, talking about whether or not we're just pushing the issue onto somewhere else if we manage to get limits or do things. And that's been one of the levers that the industry pulls against us. If you're not allowing us to come to Alaska where you have stricter water quality standards, then we'll go to somewhere where there aren't stricter standards.

[00:29:33] And so you should just let us come here. Or to the communities. If you push us away from this community, it's going to hurt, or cause impacts to another. I think that most of us within our network have concluded that any time that we can make any restrictions for a cruise ship to have access to a port is an overall win in the whole concept of being destinations, and that power, they need destinations and just because they want to dominate and colonize the entire coastal world for their purposes, doesn't mean we as each community don't have the right to say no.

[00:30:14] **Luc Renaud:** I totally agree with you, Karla. Like that's how they worked since the beginning, like try to divide, to conquer, you know, like, and I was talking about being a bully industry.

[00:30:25] So if you're not happy with what we're asking for you in our destination, well, go. Go somewhere else. Because, and there's another thing that "the destination" don't understand. And I want to point out that it's different for the Caribbean again. Because the Caribbean, they have mostly the same kind of tourism offered.

[00:30:40] Sand, sun, and the water, the sea. But I'm telling to people here in Quebec City, if they try to bully you and think that, well, if the regulation is too

harsh in Quebec City, we'll go somewhere else. But that's not true. Because there's only one Quebec City in the world. There's only one Venice, there's only one Dubrovnik, okay?

[00:31:04] So the customer will ask to go to Quebec City because they want to see Quebec City and they want to see Venice. So that kind of discourse is live because they will get the pressure from their customers to go to those cities at the end of the day and they will find a way to comply with local regulation.

[00:31:23] Just saying that we're going to go to the next door port, that's one thing, but people, they want to come to Quebec City. They want to, they don't want to go to another different city where it's not UNESCO and things like that. So. It's very important to understand that outside the Caribbean, we have the power to say no because we're a unique destination.

[00:31:46] **Rich Simpson:** Luc, when I read your work on this point, I find an interesting tension. In your article on Placencia, you show how locals internalize the logic of the cruise ship and they want to bring more ships into the port since they depend upon this income. Yet on the other hand, your vision is also for locals [00:32:00] to embrace the city's uniqueness and its notoriety as leverage to resist the domination by the industry. This is the tension that I mean: how does this sense of dependency and internalized logic shift to collective empowerment through a vision of regional identity within the community? Do you have examples of how this happens?

[00:32:18] **Luc Renaud:** So what I was trying to say in my paper is that there was one part of the community that was fighting against cruise company Norwegian Cruise Lines for that, let's take an example in the Southern part of Belize, because the cruise line managed to like kind of lock the territory and to keep all the economic benefits for themselves.

[00:32:40] And they managed to push out all the local entrepreneurs and tour guides and away from the cruise tourists. And within the community, there was this pressure to get involved with cruise tourism and try to be able to make business with those cruise tourists. And so there was a struggle within the community, at one point, for one side to push away the cruise company.

[00:33:04] And there was also another part of the community that were saying that, well, they are there, we see them every day. We need to be able to talk with them and try to make business with them. So what happened at the end is that the more powerful stakeholders within the community that managed to get involved with the cruise tourism and the cruise service and to harvest the benefits about that. So the ones who are marginalized in the first place, they were still marginalized after, when the local community managed to have more control on the cruise industry in that region. It's kind of complicated within the communities, there are politicians, there are people who have more money that can advance, there are people who want to get involved with cruise tourism, and they don't care too much about the impact.

[00:33:55] They just want to grab it for themselves. So it's not better always to say that local will manage the cruise industry or will manage the tourism industry. Some of the dynamics are just reproduced at the local level. So, as for cruise tourism in Calcutta and Belize, what I found is that, before, it was all the cruise companies who were controlling, and today, what we see is that it's the elite of the communities that are controlling the economic benefits of cruise tourism. So which one is better? I don't know because where does the money go at the end? Uh, wWe don't know but it's not going to the right person, that's for sure.

[00:34:39] **Rich Simpson:** Yes, this reproduction of the dynamic at the local level is what I saw living in Juneau, and I write about this process as well. What I focus on is how the state uses elements of storytelling to represent itself in a particular way, not only to outsiders and tourists, but also to the people who live there.

[00:34:57] In Alaska, there's this obligation to constantly repeat narratives about how this state is a wild frontier on the margins of capital. And that story functions as a powerful tool that subordinates the local community and allows the cruise industry to transform that environment at will. It very much determines who can and cannot live there as much as how one has to live there.

[00:35:18] Karla, I'm sure you have a feeling for this as well.

[00:35:21] **Karla Hart:** I see the co-optation of some of the locals is phenomenal. Like, you've got the local guy who I grew up with speaking, and when he speaks in a public meeting, he's just a puppet for the industry. But then in a private side conversation he'll say, I know you're right.

[00:35:37] We need to do something. And I'm like: say something. And he says, I can't. So the industry, the people who sell their souls to the industry lose all control. They're, a hundred percent of their economic future is locked into an industry that would slit their throat in a minute if they crossed them. So if you say, I'm not willing to accommodate your [00:36:00] increased demand for more shore excursions, the industry says, fine, we're selling them anyhow. We'll just get somebody else to do it and cut you out completely. It's very vicious. And so even the locals that seem sold out, I'm seeing the exhaustion here where they're sold out and they can't do anything, but they know it's wrong.

[00:36:20] **Rich Simpson:** I'm going to take stock of our conversation and then shift gears to address everyone's thoughts about what can be done. We've been addressing the ecological impact of the ships. The difficulties of organizing on an international scale, the lack of transparency of information, the internalization of the cruise ship logic among those living in destination cities.

[00:36:40] And at the same time, we're witnessing tremendous growth of this industry, both in terms of the size of the ships, as well as their numbers in the ocean, and their popularity only grows with the innovative ways in which the

industry is meeting consumer demand. This morning I learned about a Taylor Swift-themed cruise ship launching next year from Florida to the Bahamas. So, in [00:37:00] this cruise ship era, what do each of you identify as examples of successful actions against the ships? And what do you believe a successful intervention against this industry looks like right now?

[00:37:12] **Luc Renaud:** What I was telling about the Southern Belize, in fact, it was a victory for the community.

[00:37:18] It was one of the first times, what I documented. It's one of the rare example where communities managed to push out the cruise companies from their community because the cruise tourists, they were not allowed to come in the community of Placencia. They were forbidden to come. And after that, their community, well, they let the cruise company have about 300 tourists a day to come in their community.

[00:37:44] But the community had control of those persons. So what I mean is that most of the communities in the Caribbean, they get overwhelmed by the cruise industry, by the numbers, by the people, and they don't have that agency to push back those cruise companies. But Sinsa and the Caribbean managed to do that.

[00:38:01] The power strip went to the elite in the community, but I think it's still a victory. That even if the certain person in the community managed the cruise tourism or the cruise tourist, it's still better that than the other way around then, if it's only the cruise companies that have the say. So, I think that for the Caribbean, for a Caribbean community, I think Placencia was something very special and it's very rare to see that, but for other communities, I think it's more of giving more power to the people and trying to, I don't know, push back those companies and try to make people understand that we don't really need them, or if we want them, well, they will have to comply to our way of doing things.

[00:38:49] **Karla Hart:** Bar Harbor, Maine and Key West, Florida both had citizen initiatives that were successful that said, we want to dramatically limit the number of cruise ship passengers coming into our community.

[00:39:01] Key West ended up with one cruise ship instead of two cruise ships at a time, large cruise ships, through their efforts. It's still a large cruise ship that's causing environmental damage, that's causing turbidity in the waters. It's not a complete win, but they got half the cruise ship impact that they had before.

[00:39:20] So there are little bits like that. Some of the wins have come about as a result of communities that aren't even on our radar or participating in our network. Seeing what's going on globally, perhaps benefiting from the work that we're all doing and the media that we're getting around it to say, hey, let's limit this so places outside of the US where the industry has less power to sue, there are some of the Pacific Islands that have said no to cruise ships over a certain size, or only one cruise ship. Well, Norway is saying no emissions into a [00:40:00] bunch of their fjords. Pretty soon, in the next few years, they're going into a zero emissions policy there.

[00:40:07] We'll see how that goes. At the same time, the industry is rapidly colonizing Greenland as an Arctic alternative.

[00:40:16] **Constance Dijkstra:** In Europe, you know, we have the European Union, and so we do have the possibilities of pushing for effective rules that are going to ensure the shipping industry pays for its climate impact. Okay, so I can give you an example at Transport & Environment, we've been pushing for policies that compel ships to connect to shoreside electricity because that will result in less pollution into the air at different port cities.

[00:40:48] So, you know, in Europe, it will be compulsory for cruise ships, for ferries and for container ships above a certain size to connect to shoreside electricity by 2030. [00:41:00] Okay. So that's a major win for us. The challenge is

that, you know, we are going to have to ensure that other ship types also connect to shoreside electricity eventually.

[00:41:13] I think it's also going to be difficult to push for ships to connect to shoreside electricity before 2030, because in general, it's a lot cheaper to produce electricity from the fuel that you have on board your vessel than to buy it from the port. But I think, you know, pushing for shoreside electricity is something that we have been working on a lot and we're happy to see that at least now there's a date.

[00:41:42] So that's one example, you know, where we've been pushing for and where a policy at a regional, at a world regional level can help.

[00:41:50] **Karla Hart:** Shore power is an amazing thing that we've spent, some of us, a lot of time with the Global Cruise Activist Network looking at. It takes an hour and a [00:42:00] half for a ship to switch over from their engines to shore power and an hour and a half to disconnect.

[00:42:06] It's not just plugging in, it's 14 megawatts. It's a city. They're plugging and unplugging a city and there are all these different really complex factors. So, even if everybody is on shore power that can be, it's a minute fraction. The industry has really pushed that all of the shore power infrastructure, they're bragging about making their ship shore power ready, but they want all of the infrastructure for the shore power and the power itself, which is immensely expensive to provide clean power at this scale to have access.

[00:42:42] They're expecting all of that to be borne by governments, by the public, they're not putting up the money to make that happen. So what I'm seeing with this 2030 limit for cruise ships in Europe is a way for a community to say no to a ship. The law is that you [00:43:00] have to plug into shore power by 2030. In 2030, if a community simply opts to not build a shore power capacity that holds the biggest of ships, but says, gosh, we really like the ships that carry 2000

passengers, and so we're going to provide six megawatt shore power, but we're not going to provide 10 and 14 megawatt.

[00:43:24] Possibly, that is a lever that we can use to make the bit of difference. So I'm excited about that lever.

[00:43:34] **Constance Dijkstra:** I do see a lot of groups at local level being active, or new groups also emerging in many different cities. You know, in Spain, there are so many groups that are active on that question. There are many groups also in France, in Italy.

[00:43:51] So yeah. I mean, there's definitely a strong civil society involvement. And I think it's important to point out that those people, I mean, that they have [00:44:00] lives, you know, on the side, they work, they have their own family, et cetera. So it really shows that it's something that touches them.

[00:44:09] **Karla Hart:** I look in awe of some of the protests going on in Europe, where people are really right down there.

[00:44:15] You've got a lot of Extinction Rebellion involvement. You've got the people who are going and saying, do not come. You're not welcome. Go away. And within our cruise activist network, we've had a fair bit of discussion because towns that have become port communities for the cruise industry, we would have zero credibility in our own community with our work if we said we want no cruise ships.

[00:44:40] It's simply not an option with the dependency that is being created on our entire region. We used to have a good independent tourism economy, and the cruise industry ate that. They either absorbed all those people, or they made what used to make us [00:45:00] so attractive go away by overcrowding us, so that we're completely dependent for our tourism, or we've been told that we're completely dependent.

[00:45:09] People have that perception. So when we go down on the docks and protest, I can get people to turn out, but the rule is we're polite. The rule is we say, oh, hi, welcome to Juneau, please don't pollute. And so the cultures of protest are very different. In a small town, you have the reality that the person that you're in there facing in terms of a local business, or that you're trying to shut down, it may also be literally your next door neighbor you rely on to pull you out of the ditch if you get stuck.

[00:45:40] I mean, it's a small town, whereas the protesters in Seattle, Washington are able to have a different approach because there's more anonymity and it's a different pool when you're in a larger city. And so we've had a lot of discussions there just between what we can [00:46:00] do. Like, I have more power to go to my city government.

[00:46:03] I can call the mayor. I can call whoever, but I also have a different kind of accountability and really tight connection. So it becomes really complicated, the nuances of how there's no formula. And that's where with the network, what we do is just a lot of sharing. We had the folks who snuck onto cruise ships registered as guests and took air quality readings on cruise ships, the researchers, and reported on that.

[00:46:30] They spoke, we had some of the really great European activists talking to us about strategies they used, including the folks in Kiel, Germany, who had stopped a cruise ship from leaving port by surrounding the cruise ship and getting on the cruise ship. People from the South Hampton who do big projections of pollution onto the ships.

[00:46:53] So we had a lot of really good activism training and a lot of details on different aspects of economic impacts, all these different things. And from that, I think we all came away with an overwhelming knowledge that there really is no redeeming value of the cruise industry at all.

[00:47:11] **Luc Renaud:** And I think we're working against something much bigger than the cruise ship here.

[00:47:15] We're working against tourism and the right to tourism and this huge industry that the cruise ship is part of it. The power of discourse also, that's what I'm telling to my students all the time. We have this big sign by the road here right now. It's a recall, and the sign reads like winter is coming.

[00:47:36] You know, like it's a reminder, winter is coming. That's the publicity we have right now here. And people, oh man, the snow is coming here, they want to go south, they want to go on a cruise ship and, and they're tired and they want to have vacation and, and we understand that it's a part of a big picture.

[00:47:52] So, working on the cruise tourism thing is one thing, but the big picture of mass tourism is a big beast, again, who has a lot of power. So, I'm not saying nothing's going to change, but we have a lot of work to do because we're not just fighting against the cruise industry. We're trying to make things better for tourism as a global industry, but it's sometimes overwhelming.

[00:48:18] **Rich Simpson:** I'm glad you said that this issue is definitely part of a bigger picture. The cruise ship is interesting because it's very much about taking a break from life. And that could be a break from winter as in your case, or it could be an embrace of winter. As we see with this industry's enormous growth in destinations in Alaska and[00:48:36] throughout the northern passage. Leisure is always an escape and the character of that escape reveals needs that go unmet or what's lacking in one's particular way of life. I'm struck how ideas about nature and the environment do so much to generate the desire for certain kinds of tourism and travel Which is a terrible irony given what the ship does to the environment. In [00:49:00] Alaska, for example, what's clear is that the idea of wilderness and the experience of nature validates the vacation, and thereby it legitimates the presence and expansion of the ship.

[00:49:11] Everyone wants a photograph on top of the glacier. And so this desire to see some part of the earth which is supposedly untouched by modern life motivates the entire enterprise. It's worth remembering that the tropes of discovery of wilderness and its natural resources legitimize the Alaskan oil industry in the twentieth century and the mining industry before that, all of which occur alongside constant dispossession of land from Alaska native populations.

[00:49:38] So the cruise ship utilizes the concept of nature that builds upon and advances economic and social inequalities that are often believed to be a part of the past. I think it's important to keep these bigger pictures in mind. As we track the uniqueness of this industry as well.

[00:49:54] **Luc Renaud:** I think that cruise tourism is probably, until they convince me of the opposite, it's probably the worst way of traveling. I'm not afraid to say that it's the worst way of traveling for a lot of reasons, but we said a few of the reasons today, but if you want to travel. Don't cruise. It's just despicable for everybody, for the environment, for the community, whatever.

[00:50:21] **Karla Hart:** A lot of humans seem to be such herd animals.

[00:50:24] The idea that if you go to Europe, you quote, "have" to go to Venice, to Rome, to Paris, to London. When there are so many amazing places in between that nobody's told you you have to go to that are still genuine, that are still wonderful, that really could use somebody staying in a little bed and breakfast, taking the train.

[00:50:52] **Luc Renaud:** We all know Karla, that the herd is also on social media. You know, like if you send a picture on Instagram about the [00:51:00] town that nobody knows, the people care, and that's not what they want. They want to show themselves in the place where everybody is expecting them. And we could do another whole podcast on that issue.

[00:51:11] **Rich Simpson:** I feel we could easily make a sequel to this episode. There's so many important points to elaborate on, but I want to bring us to an end by giving everyone a chance to share thoughts they have from our discussion. Or points they'd like to make before we come to a close.

[00:51:25] **Luc Renaud:** The only thing I found so far is say to people, and I say that to my relatives also, I say that to my friends: travel less often, travel closer to home, and when you travel, travel for a longer time, you know, for a lot of good reasons.

[00:51:40] Go in the community, take time. And I know it's not everybody that can go three, four, five weeks like in Europe, summertime. I understand that. But if we start thinking about flying less, discovering our region, our town, even, and when we're traveling, when we do decide travel, try to manage to travel longer, I think that could be a path, could change the mentality slowly, slowly. Instead of the week in Punta Cana, Cuba, you know, or instead of going to Europe for 10 days and see all Europe.

[00:52:13] So I think there's ways of traveling because when we say travel less, people get scared, you know, I'm not gonna be able to to travel. Or you're saying not travel. I'm not saying not traveling, but I'm just saying try to travel in a different way, and yeah, that's the only thing I can come up with.

[00:52:30] **Karla Hart:** For my part, I think we need to help people to understand that tourism shouldn't just be a panacea that you go and get, you drink yourself to death and gamble and get these superficial looks at things, but maybe we use less carbon-intensive ways of rejuvenating ourselves and connecting with others so that we have a better society, better societies.

[00:52:55] **Constance Dijkstra:** There's perhaps a point that I would like to emphasize, which is, a little different from what Luc and Karla said, which is that cruise ships do represent a small segment of the shipping industry. And I

understand the opposition to that industry, but I think it's also important, an impact of other types of ships, of container ships.

[00:53:18] For example, all of the tankers that go around, and I think it's important to keep that in mind that the cruise ship is representative of something that is a lot bigger and that it's something that is a problem that is linked to our global economy and that we will need to also do something about that.

[00:53:39] **Rich Simpson:** I want to thank everyone for their insight and for sharing their important work and ideas with us. In my mind, a transnational coalition amongst communities, organizations, and scholars is required to form a critical response to the multiple detrimental effects of the cruise industry. What might a relational sense of autonomy among all of these coastal cruise ship cities now look like?

[00:53:59] I hope our conversation today allows you to visualize a step in that direction. Thank you for listening. Bye for now.

[00:54:08] **Andrew Culp:** On behalf of the Cultural Studies Association and Positions Podcast, enormous thank you to our guests today, and also a special shout out to the production team, including Mark [Nunes], Elaine [Venter], and many others, and look forward to more podcasts coming soon.

[00:54:23] Thank you so much.

Credits

Produced by Mark Nunes, Elaine Venter, and Richard Simpson.
Hosted by Andrew Culp.
Production by Elaine Venter, Nick Corrigan, and Lucy March.
Editorial by Mark Nunes, Jeff Heydon, Ayondela McDole, Evan Moritz, Hui Peng,

Shauna Rigaud, and Richard Simpson.

Music by Matt Nunes < https://open.spotify.com/artist/5r7EEqpB7cPsBRRV9ek1Ia?si=hdJkJavJQtid6R1VrkJDLg> .

[Editors' note: Richard Simpson co-produced this episode. For more information on the Cruise Ship Cities project or the Globalizing Southeast Alaska project, contact Richard at rfs1881gmail.com. This work has undergone post-publication peer review through a published scholarly commentary and public comments.]

Notes

1. Richard Simpson, "Toward an Alaskan Critical Regionalist Pedagogy: Mapping the Cruise Ship Industry through Visual Spatial Tactics," *Lateral* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2021), https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.2 < https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.2> . ↩

2. Celso Garcia, Christian Mestre-Runge, Enrique Morán-Tejeda, Jorge Lorenzo-Lacruz, and Dolores Tirado, "Impact of Cruise Activity on Freshwater Use in the Port of Palma (Mallorca, Spain)," *Water* 12, no. 1088 (2020): https://doi.org/10.3390/w12041088, https://repositori.udl.cat/server/api/core/bitstreams/1ba49fda-0d32-4ed7-a66f-81e97deb0289/content. ↩

3. Brandon Richardson, "New LNG-Powered Ship Christened at Port of Long Beach's Pier A," *Long Beach Business Journal*, September 2, 2022, https://lbbusinessjournal.com/news/1st-lng-powered-ship-to-call-on-long-beach-port-christened-at-pier-a < https://lbbusinessjournal.com/news/1st-lng-powered-ship-to-call-on-long-beach-port-christened-at-pier-a> . ↩

4. "Annual Report", NGO Transport and Environment (2022), https://files.mutualcdn.com/transport-environment/images/TE-AR_2022_web_compressed-1_compressed.pdf < https://files.mutualcdn.com/transport-environment/images/TE-AR_2022_web_compressed-1_compressed.pdf> ↩

5. Katherine Richardson, Will Steffen, Wolfgang Lucht, Jørgen Bendtsen, Sarah E. Cornell, et.al., "Earth Beyond Six of Nine Planetary Boundaries," *Science Advances* 9, no. 37 (September 2023): https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adh2458. ↩

Author Information

Richard Simpson

Richard Simpson is Associate Professor of English at the University of Maine, Presque Isle. His research examines the pedagogical qualities of urbanization and environment in contemporary American culture. His development of collaborative modes of knowledge-making through community-engaged participatory pedagogies and digital cartography has recently been awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities Digital Humanities Advancement Grant. His most recent publications include “Allegory or Algorithm: The Smart City as Monument” in *Claims on the City: Situated Narratives of the Urban* and “Classroom” in *University Keywords,* forthcoming from John Hopkins University Press.

View all of Richard Simpson's articles.

Constance Dijkstra

Constance Dijkstra joined Transport & Environment's shipping team as a campaigner in June 2022 to work on LNG and biofuels and is now IMO policy manager. Before T&E, she worked for three years and half at POLITICO Europe where she was in charge of the programming and organization of all the summits. Prior to that, she was a security analyst for a London-based consultancy Crisis24 where she was assessing security risks affecting the maritime sector. She started her career as a research associate in peace processes at the Graduate Institute Geneva in Switzerland and studied in the UK where she obtained a BA in international relations and MSc in conflict studies.

View all of Constance Dijkstra's articles.

Karla Hart

Karla Hart has been living, observing, and ultimately pushing back against cruise industry colonization in Alaska since the 1980s. Hart worked in and around Alaska tourism for three decades in varying

capacities, including as a business owner, serving as a governor's appointee on the statewide tourism marketing board in the 1990s, and developing wildlife viewing tourism for the state. Now retired from employment, she is a community activist, co-founded the Global Cruise Activist Network in 2020, and is presently leading a campaign to enact Ship-Free Saturdays into law in Juneau, Alaska. Her academic background is interdisciplinary, with an emphasis in social sciences.

View all of Karla Hart's articles.

Luc Renaud

Luc Renaud is an Associate Professor at the Department of Urban and Tourism Studies at the University of Quebec in Montreal. He holds a PhD in Geography and a Master's degree in Oceanography. As a specialist in territorial issues related to cruise tourism and mass tourism in general, his work is grounded in critical social science approaches within geography. His research interests focus specifically on the sustainability of mass tourism, mobility, the management of protected areas, and the socio-territorial impacts of tourism development. His engagement with critical perspectives on tourism began with his documentary film work, particularly with the film *Playa Coloniale,* which examines mass tourism in Cuba.

View all of Luc Renaud's articles.

Francesca Savoldi

Francesca Savoldi is a human geographer (PhD) concerned with the dimensions of power, politics, space and place in coastal and maritime areas. Her most recent work has focused on the urban geography and political ecology of port cities and coastal territories. As a Marie Skłodovska-Curie postdoctoral fellow at Delft University of Technology (2021–2023) she has critically examined the evolution of the port-city relationship, its contemporary power imbalances, and related contested spaces and relationalities. She is the founder of ContestedPorts.com, an online platform dedicated to social mobilizations in port cities. As a member of the Jean Monnet Chair in EU Integrated Maritime Policy, Francesca has previously investigated the ongoing transformation of maritime spaces, economies, and politics. She has also conducted research on different types of urban

conflicts, as well as citizen sciences. Currently, she is a lecturer at the Glasgow Caledonian University, visiting researcher at Erasmus and TU Delft universities, and postdoctoral research fellow at Cà Foscari University.

View all of Francesca Savoldi's articles.

Andrew Culp

Andrew Culp teaches media history and theory in the MA Program in Aesthetics and Politics and the School of Critical Studies at CalArts. His published work on media, film, politics, and philosophy has appeared in *Radical Philosophy*, *parallax*, *angelaki*, and *boundary 2* online. He serves on the Governing Board of the Cultural Studies Association. In his first book, *Dark Deleuze* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), he proposes a revolutionary new image of Gilles Deleuze's thought suited to our 24/7 always-on media environment, and it has been translated into numerous languages including Spanish, Japanese, and German.

View all of Andrew Culp's articles.

Article details

Richard Simpson, Constance Dijkstra, Karla Hart, Luc Renaud, Francesca Savoldi & Andrew Culp, "Infrastructures of Transiency: On Cruise Ships," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.15

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *Black Gathering: Art, Ecology, Ungiven Life* by Sarah Jane Cervenak (Duke University Press)

by Kelann Currie-Williams | Book Reviews, Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

ABSTRACT In *Black Gathering: Art, Ecology, Ungiven Life*, Sarah-Jane Cervenak engages with the ecoaesthetic, ecopoetic, and ecoliterary work of Black artists and writers who, through their engagement with the environment, imagine the earth and Black life outside the logics of governance, property and ownership. Guided by two primary concepts, Cervenak considers "Gathering" and "Ungiven" as crucial frameworks to think otherwise about Black sociality, togetherness, and gathering aesthetically. By attending to the creative and artistic practices of Toni Morrison, Nikki Wallschlaeger, Samiya Bashir, Gabrielle Ralambo-Rajerison, Gayl Jones, and Leonardo Drew, Cervenak underlines "gathering" as both an act of resistance to the enclosures of anti-blackness and an insistent practice of "deregulated togetherness."

KEYWORDS Black studies, aesthetics, ecocriticism, literary studies, relationality

Black Gathering: Art, Ecology, Ungiven Life. By Sarah Jane Cervenak. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021, 208 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1447-8. US List: $26.95.

Sarah Jane Cervenak's *Black Gathering: Art, Ecology, Ungiven Life* presents a rich and noteworthy intervention into the scholarship in visual culture, literary studies, and Black ecologies, through a nuanced focus on the aesthetics and poetics of Black togetherness and gathering. Concerned with how Black artists and writers create worlds of otherwise existence and unregulated possibility through their work, Cervenak situates writing, sculpture, photography, and painting as artistic

practices capable of yielding environments of relationality (13). As the subtitle of the monograph suggests, the book's preoccupation lies in attending to what is produced at the intersection of art and ecology. It is in this nexus that the works of Black writers and artists not only highlight the capacity of togetherness to obstruct the over-regulation and governance of Black social life, but also undermine the extractionist and anti-Black presumption that such life can be propertied or given away (7).

Black Gathering interrogates the logic of possessiveness that shapes whiteness and the belief in its ownership over earth and land, and over Black and Indigenous peoples in the Americas. Through this, Cervenak suggests that "the release of earth from its fraudulent ownership is coterminous with the release of flesh" (11). Here, she effectively positions Black life (its body, its flesh) as tethered to the earth itself in what Cervenak refers to as the "fleshy-earthly" (74). By way of her engagement with the legacies of transatlantic slavery, settler-colonialism, extractivism, and racial capitalism—a phenomenon that Jodi Melamed after Ruth Wilson Gilmore sees as a "technology of antirelationality"[1]—Cervenak creates an ecological and aesthetic-oriented framework to think about Black sociality, togetherness, and gathering outside of the enclosures of anti-Blackness and white supremacy. Thinking alongside scholars and writers such as Camille Dungy, Kimberly Ruffin, Tiffany Lethabo King, Saidiya Hartman, and Dorceta Taylor, Cervenak's *Black Gathering* employs a wide range of expertise, demonstrating its interdisciplinary rigor and notable contributions to the fields of eco-criticism and Black geographies. Not wholly concerned with providing an historical overview or critical analysis of environmental justice movements sought out by Black communities, nor narrowly focused on attending to Black feminist art and poetics only as forms of cultural production, Cervenak's monograph falls somewhere between these two spaces. *Black Gathering* proposes that the aesthetic qualities of the environment and the ecological substance of Black life need to be thought together. This proposition, of attending to the ecoaesthetic and ecopoetic qualities that punctuate Black art, place *Black Gathering* alongside key texts in the

study of Black ecologies, such as *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* by Camille Dungy and *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* by Kimberly N. Ruffin.[2]

Cervenak is guided by two overarching concepts, which she weaves through the book: "gathering" and "ungiven." She unravels the polysemy of "gathering" by effectively drawing on its two parts of speech, as noun and verb. In the first part of the book entitled "Gathering's Art," Cervenak begins by exploring "gathering" as a noun. In this sense, gathering refers to a collective or assembly—the site wherein togetherness is engendered. As noun, a gathering is not unlike an ecology which, in a bio-environmental context, is marked by relations and interactions with actants and organisms. Throughout "For A While At Least," the book's first chapter, Cervernak engages with the prose of Toni Morrison and the prose-poetry of Nikki Wallschlaeger to reveal the "artfulness" (16) of gathering and the ecoaesthetics of relation that might be experienced through colour, texture, or affect. In a critical and generous meditation on *Beloved,* she presents how "Morrison merges the ecological and the aesthetic to advance an unextractive ecoaesthesis" (24) and that such a fusing of the ecological and the aesthetic is a core preoccupation within Black feminist writing. Wallschlaeger's poetry collection *Houses* is brought into conversation with *Beloved* to illustrate the unique capacity of gathering and the intimacies of "communal living" (26) to not only alter the quality of an environment but also envisage home (imagined or otherwise) as outside logics of ownership and extraction (26). The ecopoetic bend of both texts serve as paths towards thinking Black ecologies more expansively, which is to say viewing ecology as it refers to the earthly-environmental as well as through its etymological meaning of "*oikos*"—a home or site of gathering (9).

In chapter two, "The Art of the Matter," there is a distinctive spatial shift as readers are ushered from earth, through its thresholding atmosphere, and into the cosmos. In her analyses of Samiya Bashir's poetry collection *Field Theories* and

Gabrielle Ralambo-Rajerison's prose poem "To What Do I Owe This Pleasure," Cervernak asks her readers to, once again, think of ecoaesthetic possibility but in the new context of astrophysics and the extraplanetary—what she refers to as the "cosmosaesthetic and cosmopoetic" (60). Cervenak makes a decisive shift by decentering earth and the physical world to consider "the attempted cosmic reach of anti-Blackness" (66) in the context of quantum physics as well as dark matter and energy, as presented in Bashir and Ralambo-Rajerison's respective poetic interventions. While inventive and speculative in its reach, readers may find that the chapter falls short of connecting fully with Cervernak's three other chapters, leaving her interrogation of gathering as a resistance to the enclosure and regulation of Black life under settler-colonialism and plantation slavery (and its afterlives) uneven. Readers who are keenly interested in engaging with the earthly and environmental concerns of Black ecologies, might find that Cervenak's analysis of a "poetic experience of galactic relation" (17) does not sufficiently address "what anti-Blackness does to earthly relation" (89).However, the chapter carefully reintroduces her earlier concept of 'ungiven' which is foregrounded in the opening to *Black Gathering* and serves as the book's philosophical contribution.

The book's second part, "The Art of Gathering," takes up the concept of "ungiven" in earnest by exploring its relationship to Black gathering (or togetherness). Ungiven or ungivenness for Cervenak is a conceptual and political refutation of whiteness' presumed possession over lands and bodies. Drawing from Black studies scholarship she advances that the earth cannot be owned and, as such, cannot be given—it is not "given-overable" (68). Likewise, Black lives cannot be propertied because they are as always-already outside of regulation, confirming that both life and freedom cannot be gifted nor *given* to Black people in the wake of slavery's abolition—it is simply ungivable. Despite not explicitly citing Tiffany Lethabo King who, in *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*, writes of the obsessive preoccupation the white "conquistador settler" has with the ownership and domination of both land and

Black lives,[3] one can assume that Cervenak's line of thinking around possession draws from King's work. With this as the section's guiding frame, Cervenak shifts to gathering's workings as a verb to consider how artistic practices might be *acts* or expressions of gathering or "bringing together" in themselves.

In this section, Cervenak creatively and critically positions the work of Gayl Jones and Leonardo Drew as intricate "unanticipated" arrangements (98), of language in Jones's case and of material objects in Drew's. Across both chapters, Cervenak remains curious about the capacity of experimentation and abstraction to hinder discernibility and extractive modes of relating. Beginning with "Arrangements Against the Sentence," the third chapter, Cervenak considers how the experimental writing of Jones's short story collection "Towards an All-Inclusive Structure," thwarts knowability through a mode of gathering that resists regulation. The linguistic composition of Jones's stories is deliberately abstract and operate as such to shelter the "right to opacity"[4] of her disabled and mentally ill Black characters. Through enactments of what Cervenak calls "cripped gatherings of language" (104), the internal lives of Jones's characters are left ungiven and deregulated. In the fourth and final chapter entitled, "A Project From Outside," readers are invited to see the abstracted sculpture installations created by Leonardo Drew through the lens of disposability, indiscernible chaos, and material togetherness. The experimental sculptures within Drew's decades-long series "God's Mouth" are the core objects of study in this chapter. The discarded and weathered materials which Drew gathers and composes into sculptures (151) are, as Cervenak argues, the "the beauty of togethernesses without explanation" (124). Through her analysis, Cervenak makes a decidedly incisive move to position Drew not only as a visual artist but also as a "polyecological" artist (134) whose practice relies on the reuse of disposed objects and incorporating their ecological histories into the composition of the sculptures.

Cervernak's *Black Gathering* differentiates itself from the current work being produced in the fields of Black ecologies and Black geographies, as seen through

the scholarship of J. T. Roane, Camilla Hawthorne, Justin Hosbey, and Jovian Scott Lewis. The book's focus on the ecoaesthetic, ecopoetic, and ecoliterary work of Black artists and writers who imagine the earth and Black life outside the logics of property and ownership, succeeds in gifting its readers an arsenal of lush frameworks with which to think. Across all four chapters, Cervenak's writing weaves in and out of the poetic and the academic, producing a lyrically rigorous and profoundly intricate text. While at times challenging to parse for exactly these reasons, *Black Gathering* demands of its readers slow reading and an even slower meditative engagement which might prove difficult yet ultimately rewarding for readers unfamiliar with the current scholarship of Black ecologies, Black geographies, ecopoetics, and anti-colonial philosophy. Moreover, her attunement to the potential of gathering and togetherness to enact new modes of being in the world will be valuable to students, scholars, and artists alike who are in search of an expansive theorization on what an ecology or environment could be. Throughout, she is guided by her belief that "an artful interaction with the environment potentiates a dream of another relation" (13). As a kind of refrain, *Black Gathering* challenges its readers to consider that the term "Black ecologies" could otherwise be expressed as the study which takes seriously the beautifully entangled relationship between ungiven people and ungiven earth.

Notes

1. Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 76–85. ↩
2. Cervenak uses the terms "ecopoetics" and "ecoaesthetics" to refer to a poetic and aesthetic (or artful) engagement with the environment that acknowledges the interconnectedness of earth, non-humans, and humans. ↩
3. Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 107. ↩
4. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 109. ↩

Author Information

Kelann Currie-Williams

Kelann Currie-Williams is a visual artist, oral historian, and writer based in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal where they are currently a PhD student at Concordia University's Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture. Their research focuses on the histories of image-making and photographic preservation/archival practices taken up by Black Canadians during the late-nineteenth to late-twentieth centuries, and the presence of these photographs within personal, community, and institutional archives. Kelann's work has appeared in *Urban History Review*, *Canadian Journal of History*, *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, and *Philosophy of Photography*. They are an affiliate of the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS).

View all of Kelann Currie-Williams's articles.

Article details

Kelann Currie-Williams, "Review of *Black Gathering: Art, Ecology, Ungiven* Life by Sarah Jane Cervenak (Duke University Press)," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.16

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *Biopolitics, Geopolitics, Life: Settler States and Indigenous Presence* edited by René Dietrich and Kerstin Knopf (Duke University Press)

by Leah Kuragano | Book Reviews, Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

ABSTRACT Questions of violence, governance, life, and land have long animated critique within settler colonial studies and Indigenous studies. *Biopolitics, Geopolitics, Life* interrogates these lines of inquiry by centering Indigenous politics and onto-epistemologies from a variety of disciplines and across a range of settler colonial contexts to address the enmeshments of bio- and geopolitical logics and practices.

KEYWORDS American Studies, Indigenous studies, Native studies, biopolitics, critical ethnic studies, settler colonialism

Biopolitics, Geopolitics, Life: Settler States and Indigenous Presence. Edited by René Dietrich and Kerstin Knopf. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2023, 296 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1976-3. US List: $27.95.

Questions of violence, governance, life, and land have long animated critique within settler colonial studies and Indigenous studies. *Biopolitics, Geopolitics, Life* interrogates these lines of inquiry by centering Indigenous politics and onto-epistemologies from a variety of disciplines and across a range of settler colonial contexts to address the enmeshments of bio- and geopolitical logics and practices. Although the majority of the essays (those by Mishuana Goeman, Sandy Grande, Mark Rifkin, Sabine N. Meyer, and Jacqueline Fear-Segal) focus on

the settler colonial conditions of the so-called continental United States, other contributors center their attention on Canada (Robert Nichols), Hawai'i (David Uahikeaikalei'ohu Maile), Guyana (Shona N. Jackson), Australia and Aotearoa (Michael R. Griffiths), and Brazil (Kerstin Knopf).

Each of the essays explicitly take up theories of biopower, making this edited volume a valuable addition to course syllabi in critical or political theory. For example, a reading of Robert Nichols's essay on the settler colonial racism of Canada's prison system (Chapter 3) accompanied by Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and *The Birth of Biopolitics* would invite an especially fruitful classroom discussion. Likewise, Sabine N. Meyer's analysis of bio- and geopolitical enmeshments represented in Native American Removal literature (Chapter 7) would be a dynamic companion to Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, as Meyer's essay responds to this foundational text in depth. These essays enrich our understandings of biopower by applying influential theoretical frameworks to present-day Indigenous experiences and instances of settler state violence.

As co-editor René Dietrich describes at length in the introduction to the text, race and racialization are key through-lines within this collection. Many of the essays add to a growing body of scholarship that asks how race and indigeneity function as distinct yet related categories of analysis within settler colonial critique. In Chapter 2, Sandy Grande (Quechua) argues that Indigenous conceptions of aging rupture the settler colonial, white supremacist, and racial capitalist logics that underpin the biomedical management of the elderly. Kanaka Maoli scholar David Uahikeaikalei'ohu Maile's essay (Chapter 4) assesses the US government's offer of federal tribal recognition to Indigenous Hawaiians as one premised on their biopolitical racialization by the settler state. Grande and Maile capture two unique contexts within which the US has sought to buttress its power by managing Indigenous peoples as racialized populations.

Shona N. Jackson (Chapter 5) and Mark Rifkin (Chapter 6) extend this examination of race by focusing their studies on the politics of racialized non-Indigenous subjects within settler colonial societies. Rifkin reads Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy of Afrofuturist novels as an anti-racist critique of Euro-American humanness that erases Indigenous place-based peoplehood. Jackson examines the settler colonial and biopolitical logics that shape (Afro and Indo) Creole–Indigenous relations and conceptions of "sovereignty" in post-independence Guyana. Rifkin's and Jackson's essays evoke an important ongoing discussion, invigorated by scholars such as Tiffany Lethabo King and Jodi Byrd, that seeks to build political solidarities between Black, Indigenous, and people of color living under settler colonialism.[1] It is worth mentioning, however, that *Biopolitics, Geopolitics, Life* notably elides the growing body of literature on Asian settler colonialism. Dietrich's introduction cites several scholars whose work has "demonstrated the insufficiency of a rigid settler-Native binary to account for slavery and forms of forced migration" (10). Although it is true that many have rejected the use of the term "settler" to describe non-Indigenous racialized subjects, other prominent scholars, including Haunani-Kay Trask, Candace Fujikane, and Dean Itsuji Saranillio, have presented distinct perspectives on this issue at the intersections of Asian American, Indigenous, and settler colonial studies.[2]

Methodologically, *Biopolitics, Geopolitics, Life* represents a wide range of approaches. Scholars of literature will appreciate that four of the ten chapters engage in literary analysis, including the aforementioned essays by Rifkin and Meyer. In Chapter 1, Mishuana Goeman (Tonawanda Band of Seneca) reads the work of three Indigenous women writers—Deborah Miranda, Louise Erdich, and Frances A. Washburn—to observe how their storytelling practices "witness" systemic violence against Native women as linked to land dispossession. Michael R. Griffiths (Chapter 8) turns to works by Māori author Witi Ihimaera and Noongar author Kim Scott to propose a decolonial reading practice that refuses to simply

subsume writing from Indigenous epistemological perspectives into the magical realism genre.

Cultural studies scholars will be interested in the contributions made by Jacqueline Fear-Segal (Chapter 9), co-editor Kerstin Knopf (Chapter 10), and Alyosha Goldstein (Foreword). Fear-Segal's analysis of photographs and drawings at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania argues that Indigenous students used creative tactics to protect themselves and assert forms of visual sovereignty. Knopf's essay analyzes *Birdwatchers*, a 2008 film from director Marco Bechis that represents the struggles of the Indigenous Guaraní to reclaim their ancestral lands in Brazil. Knopf contends that the film highlights the conditions of de/reterritorialization, a biopolitical process through which the settler state of Brazil has refigured Indigenous lands as "post/colonial space." Goldstein's foreword provides a fascinating examination of Mi'kmaq filmmaker Jeff Barnaby's *Blood Quantum* (2019) and the "immunological paradigm" of settler colonial governance. These three contributions demonstrate how creative visual-cultural production can mobilize Indigenous defiance and present salient critiques of settler state violence.

The essays in *Biopolitics, Geopolitics, Life* are provocative and cutting-edge, and offer many potential uses for research and teaching. The volume feels cohesive, and the chapters are exceptionally well-organized around key ideas and frameworks, which encourages readers to explore linkages across fields and cultural and geopolitical contexts. Indigenous and settler colonial studies scholars, especially those working within political science, literature, and visual and cultural studies, will surely find this volume to be a valuable resource.

Notes

1. See Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Duke University Press, 2019). ↩

2. For essays by Trask, Fujikane, and Saranillio on this topic, see Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura, eds., *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai'i* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2008). ↩

Author Information

Leah Kuragano

Leah Kuragano is Assistant Professor in the Department of History at the University of Winnipeg, where she teaches courses on race, culture, and society in the United States. Her research interests include US settler colonialism and Indigenous politics in the Pacific, Asian diaspora and racialization, and the historical production of knowledge and culture in twentieth-century America.

View all of Leah Kuragano's articles.

Article details

Leah Kuragano, "Review of *Biopolitics, Geopolitics, Life: Settler States and Indigenous Presence* edited by René Dietrich and Kerstin Knopf (Duke University Press)," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.17

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *Dancing Indigenous Worlds: Choreographies of Relation* by Jacqueline Shea Murphy (University of Minnesota Press)

by Diana Duarte Bernal | Book Reviews, Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

ABSTRACT Jacqueline Shea Murphy's *Dancing Indigenous Worlds* deals with her participation in festivals, performances, and conversations with Indigenous dance artists, whose practices enact, register, and experience relationality. Relationality is both an expression of Indigenous ways of being and knowing and an integral part of dance work, including all the activities produced around it. Each chapter of the book explores in depth an aspect of relationality based on the work of an artist and the descriptions of the experiences and sensations that each of these has awakened in the author, both in the author's voice and that of her interlocutors.

KEYWORDS Indigenous peoples, dance, decolonial, performance, relationality

Dancing Indigenous Worlds: Choreographies of Relation. By Jacqueline Shea Murphy. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022. 408 pp. (paperback). ISBN 978-1-5179-1268-0. US List: $35.00.

I take on this review as part of an exploration of the intersections between ethnography and performance, looking for appropriate inquiry methods, ethical-methodological considerations, and epistemological implications in the research on dance practices of groups that are made subaltern. This is not a space to write more extensively about myself, but I make this brief introductory reference to give an account of where I stand when I meet *Dancing Indigenous Worlds:*

Choreographies of Relation. The importance of opening by introducing oneself to inform interlocutors of the position and limitations of the speaking voice is one of the lessons that the author, Jacqueline Shea Murphy, has, based on long relationships with Indigenous people, incorporated into her work, and that she shares with her readers in the preface of the book.

Dancing Indigenous Worlds is the result of several years of Shea Murphy's participation in festivals, performances, conferences, and meetings around dance in territories of what are known as Canada, New Zealand, the United States, and Australia. It focuses on the work of Indigenous dance artists of diverse origins, whose practices enact, register, and experience relationality as part of the recognition of, representation of, and ways of inhabiting different generational layers and histories through time, and the multiple human, non-human, and more than human worlds present beyond those imposed by colonizers (3). Each chapter of the book explores an angle of relationality based on the work of an artist and the descriptions of the experiences, feelings, and sensations that each of these has awakened in the author, in what she calls an "embodied scholarship" (45).

In the introduction, Shea Murphy presents the challenges that studying relationality offers for the different processes involved in research practice, including the ways of communicating, the possibility of contributing to the deepening of the crossings between dance studies and Indigenous studies, and the importance of accounting for the genealogies and epistemological debates that exist around the analytical categories that support the argument of the book and that are put in tension in it. An example of this is the centrality that the author gives to the choreographic as a result of the conversations she has held with Indigenous artists for several years, recognizing that this is a term that is part of a Eurocentric tradition of dance, in which individual authorship, the value of what happens on stage, and the access of elite groups are privileged.

However, the challenge that the author assumes is to discuss how Indigenous dance artists are rejecting and recalibrating the terms that coloniality has embedded in modern/contemporary dance (5) by activating experiences and practices of relationality. This involves understanding dance as an exercise of being with other bodies and entities, and of knowing, creating meaning, negotiating history, and tracing presence through time. It also means assessing the ephemeral and sporadic that occur both in the performance and in all the activities produced around it, instances of resurgence (8) that Shea Murphy considers fundamental to maintaining and regenerating language and knowledge within and among Indigenous communities, but not for the validation of settlers, tourists, or artistic foundations.

In the first chapter, "Choreographies of Relational Reciprocity," Shea Murphy exchanges insights with Māori choreographer Jack Gray about the creative process of *Mitimiti*, a dance work in which Gray explores his *whakapapa*[1] (Māori word that refers to ancestry, in terms of lineage and territorial roots). This muse is extended to other dancers of Atamira Dance Company for the assembly of the work and also allows the activation of relations between Indigenous communities from different parts of the world through the internet during the promotional campaign, thus installing a reflection on the expansive sense of performance. This and other experiences described by the author begin to give meaning to the Māori concept of *manaakitanga*, which refers to hospitality and reciprocal care, and both are promulgated as an integral part of all the spaces and connections generated by Indigenous dance beyond the stage.

"Choreographies of Perspectival Relationality" is the second chapter, which focuses on the work of choreographer Rulan Tangen and Dancing Earth: Indigenous Contemporary Dance Creations (DE). The training and creative method of this company opens spaces for inclusion and diversity of anatomies and dance techniques for anyone who has been affected in any way by colonization and wishes to explore relationships to or ruptures with their family

and history. In this way, for the author, relationality is manifested in the choreographic encounter of multiple ways of being and perceiving, recognizing the interconnection and interdependence of different positions, as well as the partiality of each gaze. In addition to observing these various positionalities of perspective in the work of Tangen and DE, throughout the chapter, Shea Murphy also uses the narrative voice of different "characters" as a resource to explore her own position in various situations.

"Interlude/Pause/Provocation" is a section in the middle of the book that invites us to stop and reflect on relationality from a situated and racialized perspective. Here, the author offers both a detailed description of the performance of Alutiiq choreographer Tanya Lukin Linklater, which is about the physical and symbolic erasure of women in her community at Refuge Rock, and the narration of the impressions, thoughts, and conversations generated by this work. For Shea Murphy, the artist's body promulgates the lineages of women who, with their presence and embodied knowledge necessary for existence (washing, singing, nesting, caring), represented a threat to colonial white authority. At the end of the section, the author includes the response received from Lukin Linklater to the draft of this text, expressing how she felt about her body as an Indigenous mother being read by a white academic, giving an account of the repercussions of addressing issues such as motherhood without considering the multiple violences to which Indigenous women have historically been exposed.

Chapter 3, "Choreographies of Relational Abun-dance," focuses on the work *SHORE* by Yu'pik choreographer Emily Johnson. The conceptual core is abundance, put in crisis in Western societies by distrust of states, the status quo, and the liberal-capitalist fantasies. However, precarity and scarcity are not perceived as new or contingent for Indigenous communities because since the beginning of the colonial project, they have seen their living conditions threatened and have experienced the dispossession of their bodies, lands, and worldviews. For Shea Murphy, *SHORE* is a piece that in its different moments (story,

performance, community action, and feast) expresses “abun-dance,” a term coined by Randy Martin to refer to the richness of the relational interdependence that dance promulgates with the generation of possibilities to cultivate attention towards embodied and sensory knowledge, and with feeling and experiencing in proximity to other bodies and entities.

The last chapter, “Choreographies of Relational Refusings,” begins with the narration of Shea Murphy’s participation in Yirramboi First Nations Arts Festival (Melbourne) and the notification of the protocol of a ceremony in which non-Indigenous people were requested to refrain from attending. This experience led her to review how she cultivates and enacts relationality in her research process, from her position as a white academic with training in modern dance. This leads her to reaffirm that work with Indigenous communities must be based both on respectful, responsible, and reciprocal attention and listening, and on the recognition of refusals as a performative way of interrogating white power and privilege and of addressing Indigenous agency (268).

Reviewing *Dancing Indigenous Worlds* was challenging because of the multiplicity of layers of information it reports and the “choreographed” narrative structure it achieves, combining experiences, feelings, sensations, and descriptions of the performances, both in the author’s voice and in that of her interlocutors. Undoubtedly, Shea Murphy consolidates a voluminous source of references to feed the research field of Indigenous Dance Studies and illustrates relationality through the practices she analyzes, the ways of producing knowledge, and the resources to communicate it, avoiding falling into the extractivist and colonial practices of the academy and stopping and apologizing when necessary. For these reasons, this book contributes not only to someone interested in decolonial and dance studies but also to those who want to do more humane research.

Notes

1. I only use Indigenous terms that are defined in the book, assuming the risk of occupying them in an erroneous way because of the lack of first-hand knowledge of their meaning. ↩

Author Information

Diana Duarte Bernal

Diana Duarte Bernal is a PhD Candidate in Territory, Space, and Society (Universidad de Chile), sponsored by ANID 2022 (National Agency for Research and Development). She earned a Master's degree in Cultural Management at the same university, where she currently works as a professor and is part of the editorial committee of its journal; she also holds a BA in Political Science (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogota). Diana is part of the Archivos Migrantes (Migrant Files) project, which is dedicated to the research and promotion of cultural practices of migrant communities in Chile. Her current research seeks to understand the processes of production and appropriation of urban spaces through dance by Latin American migrant women who have come to live in Santiago. She was born in Colombia and has lived in Chile for 13 years.

View all of Diana Duarte Bernal's articles.

Article details

Diana Duarte Bernal, "Review of *Dancing Indigenous Worlds: Choreographies of Relation* by Jacqueline Shea Murphy (University of Minnesota Press)," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.18

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* by Moya Bailey (New York University Press)

by Yiming Wang | Book Reviews, Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

ABSTRACT *Misogynoir Transformed* is a pioneering work by Moya Bailey that offers a groundbreaking analysis of misogynoir and the transformative strategies for social change in contemporary digital society. Through careful analysis of media representations, web series, and social media platforms, Bailey reveals how Black women and Black nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant folks encounter and resist damaging narratives. Bailey also introduces the conceptual framework of digital alchemy to conceptualize the praxis that Black women employ to transform harmful everyday media into valuable social justice media, which functions to reduce the negative effects of misogynoir and create their own safe and inclusive community. This transformative activity highlights the dual effects of visibility—it is empowering but also precarious. Bailey's work is evidence of how digital platforms have the positive power to reduce misogynoir and reshape the discourse on gender diversity and social justice.

KEYWORDS Black studies, digital media, misogynoir, queer studies, resistance

Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance. By Moya Bailey. NY: New York University Press, 2021. 242 pp. (paperback) ISBN: 978-1-4798-7874-1. US List: $16.95.

Moya Bailey's *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* presents a comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis that compellingly explores the intricate forces shaping misogynoir today, alongside the digital resistance

strategies employed by Black women to enact transformative change. Bailey employs an array of methodological tools, including close reading, interviews, and digital humanities techniques. With this mixed-method approach, Bailey explores the dynamic utilization of social media by Black women to counter misogynoir and cultivate their roles as "digital alchemists" (21). It is noteworthy that when Bailey uses the term Black women, she especially focuses on queer and trans women. She frequently pairs "Black women" with "Black nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant folks" to amplify visibility while challenging the often-presumed heteronormativity of the category "Black women."

One of the most significant achievements of Bailey's work lies in the precise language she uses to theorize the concept of misogynoir and its negative impacts on the physical, mental, and social well-being of Black women. Though "misogynoir" was originally created with reference to American media, its use now transcends borders and describes a global phenomenon (1). Coined by Bailey, "misogynoir describes the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization" (1). From biased policy formulations to problematic media depictions, misogynoir pervades everyday life. Bailey shows that throughout American history, Black women have been portrayed with negative stereotypes in mass media, exacerbating the daily violence and discrimination that they experience. Recent media portrayals of racial equality have disproportionately centered on Black men, thereby reducing the possible liberatory escape from heteronormativity for Black women (5). Therefore, Bailey suggests, it has been necessary and crucial for Black women and Black nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant people to unite and resist against misogynoir, establishing their own spaces on social media.

Another pivotal contribution of this book is the introduction of the framework of digital alchemy. Digital alchemy is a praxis designed by "women of color, Black women, and Black nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant people to transform

everyday digital media into valuable social justice media that recode the failed scripts that negatively impact their lives" (24). Shifting the focus away from the negative stereotypes inherent in digital culture—such as hypersexuality, proneness to anger, and obesity—digital alchemy centers on generating transformative strategies against misogynoir and expanding alternative visions of worldbuilding. Across the book, Bailey demonstrates how this approach proves instrumental in mitigating the harm arising from misogynoir while fostering trust and shared values within a newly formed community dedicated to self-preservation.

In Chapter 1, "Misogynoir Is a Drag," Bailey reveals the ubiquity of misogynoir within digital culture while explaining the necessity for misogynoir to be transformed. In this context, the term "drag" does not refer to the playful, exaggerated performance of gender but rather signifies the act of drawing or pulling away. To "drag" means forcefully and aggressively admonishing someone verbally, with the intention of publicly embarrassing and insulting them—often linked to misogynoir on digital platforms. Bailey makes the statement, "to say 'misogynoir is a drag' is to say that misogynoir is tiresome and vexing, annoying and trying" (35). In order to demonstrate what misogynoir in a white supremacist patriarchal culture looks like, Bailey first contextualizes and analyzes the Twitter hashtag #RuinABlackGirlsMonday, in which people tweeted images of white women's bodies with stereotypically Black physical features. Bailey investigates Black women's engagement with this hashtag in order to show how they managed to transform the toxic conversation into a neutralized space for their mental health. Next, Bailey examines the video "Shit Black Girls Say," a response to the video "Shit Girls Say." "Shit Girls Say" makes fun of the way girls talk, but in the process perpetuates existing stereotypes about Black women as loud, angry, overly sexual, cis straight, and self-loathing. However, "Shit Black Girls Say" is written by a Black queer woman, which reveals that Black women also participate in misogynoir by distancing themselves from and suppressing other Black women to appease the patriarchy. Later, Bailey examines YouTube comments regarding

violent police actions against Black girls to highlight their vulnerable situation as a result of long-standing, damaging stereotypes and the urgency for change.

The following chapter, “Transforming Misogynoir through Trans Advocacy,” focuses on transformative online activities centered around Black trans women and their endeavors to create a secure environment for themselves. This chapter begins with the introduction of trans advocate Janet Mock, who also created the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs for women to express themselves and gather. Bailey emphasizes the dynamic and real-time nature of social media engagement as a lifesaving and health-affirming praxis. Conducting two illustrative case studies of hashtags, namely #GirlsLikeUs and #FreeCeCe, across platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr, Bailey examines both the virtual and physical networks forged through these hashtags. These networks have heightened the visibility of Black trans women and expanded people’s understanding of health. Such networks reflect their agency in organizing and collaborating, not only with each other but also more broadly with wider LGBTQ organizations. For example, influenced by Support CeCe activism, Black community and LGBTQ youth workers protested against disproportionate police attention in 2012 (100). As Bailey notes, “visibility is a double-edged sword: As much as we want to celebrate the successes of trans women of color in the public sphere, that excitement is tempered with the deadly reality of trans women of color’s lives being cut short by violence” (102).

In Chapter 3, “Web Show Worldbuilding Mitigates Misogynoir,” Bailey analyses three web shows on YouTube, through which Black queer and trans creators redefine dominant representations of themselves. The three web shows—*Between Women*, *Skye’s the Limit*, and *195 Lewis*— constitute content crafted by and for marginalized Black queer individuals, offering “their own possibility models,” rather than catering to the “privileged out-group members” (104). These shows present many aspects of Black queer life that are not acknowledged in mainstream media, including gender roles, kink, queer sex, mental health, and relationships. According to Bailey, these shows, which cover both positive and

debatable topics, such as cheating and intimate partner violence, "provide a different way of doing family outside a normative frame" (143). For example, *195 Lewis* discusses polyamory and transforms the dynamics of cheating into complicated feelings that allow for multiple loves (136). Black queer creators explore and focus on the health, happiness, and relationships of Black queer women by describing the realities they aspire to, providing a misogynoir-free space for Black women to take care of their health and recover from trauma.

In the subsequent chapter, "Alchemists in Action against Misogynoir," Bailey focuses on the social media platform Tumblr and its Black queer users. Drawing on insightful interviews with two Black queer informants, Bailey points out that Tumblr was utilized to "educate a generation of users in social justice activism" (165) and was thought of as a "relatively safe digital space" for Black LGBTQ people to congregate (151), notably from 2009 to 2015 (147). Bailey again discusses the dual-edged nature of visibility, arguing that Tumblr operates as a force. It provides a space for marginalized people to find with each other and foster a collective repository of accomplishments, while simultaneously exacerbating the risk of external exploitation and targeting (170). Therefore, Bailey calls for creating new tools and new strategies to empower these digital communities to transform misogynoir and their relationship with it.

Moya Bailey's groundbreaking work constitutes an invaluable contribution to Black studies, queer studies, and media studies. Bailey contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender diversity and social justice, challenging the heteronormative framework in both mainstream and academic narratives. Through her profound insights and rigorous research, Bailey illuminates marginalized people and deepens readers' awareness of misogynoir and the transformative actions of digital alchemists. In addition, *Misogynoir Transformed* emphasizes the significant role of social media as a space of resistance and transformation, prompting a reclamation of digital spaces and enhancing the sense of community and agency among Black women. At the same time, Bailey emphasizes the double effect of

this greater visibility, keeping a discerning gaze on the unresolved issues and potential dilemmas that emerge as a result of visibility. Despite platforms like Tumblr and Twitter having been harnessed as transformative spaces, institutionalized misogynoir remains pervasive—perhaps even more so—within short video platforms, thereby disseminating its pernicious influence far beyond the confines of Black women's community. For readers who are unfamiliar with the digital alchemy crafted by Black women in America and those unintentionally immersed within an uncritical environment of misogynoir, this book serves as an illuminating entry point for reflection. It challenges readers to contemplate their own roles and avoid media practices that inadvertently perpetuate misogynoir. This is a central takeaway from Bailey's work, and it offers a path towards advancing social justice in the future.

Author Information

Yiming Wang

Yiming Wang is a PhD candidate in the Arts, Media and Culture Program at Maastricht University. She is working on the project "Fandom and Participatory Censorship: *Boys' Love* Fiction and Globalized Activities across the Great Firewall of China." She has coauthored with Jia Tan "Participatory Censorship and Digital Queer Fandom: The Commercialization of *Boys' Love* Culture in China" in the *International Journal of Communication*. She completed her MPhil degree in Gender Studies (affiliated with Cultural Studies) at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her research interests include fan studies, queerness and feminism, popular culture, and censorship studies.

View all of Yiming Wang's articles.

Article details

Yiming Wang, "Review of *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* by Moya Bailey (New York University Press)," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.19

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *The Life Worth Living: Disability, Pain, and Morality* by Joel Michael Reynolds (University of Minnesota Press)

by Kora Dzbinski | Book Reviews, Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

ABSTRACT Joel Micheal Reynolds's *The Life Worth Living: Disability, Pain, and Morality* unpacks the exclusion and demonization of disability within Western philosophy and bioethics. Through the lens of morality and phenomenology, Reynolds demonstrates a fundamental misrepresentation of disability that conflates disabled life with pain, suffering, and death. Through a careful dismantling of this "ableist conflation," Reynolds points his readers toward an anti-ableist future that reconsiders disability, pain, and systems of care as a whole.

KEYWORDS disability studies, mortality, pain, phenomenoloy, philosophy

The Life Worth Living: Disability, Pain, and Morality. By Joel Michael Reynolds. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2022, 216p. (paperback). ISBN: 978-1517907785. US List: $21.95.

Western "philosophical, bioethical and public culture" (10) narratives of disability are often underlined with what philosopher Joel Micheal Reynolds theorizes as the "ableist conflation" (4)—the idea that disability is inherently synonymous with suffering, pain, isolation, and even death. This is where Reynolds's newest work, *The Life Worth Living: Disability, Pain, and Morality*, begins—with the question of how, when disability is seen as *the same as* constant distress and mortality,

disabled life is devalued and positioned as intrinsically undesirable. Reynolds further posits an examination of chronic pain beyond the ableist conflation. Pain, while separate from disability, operates as a material "force" (12) that demands reorientation.

The Life Worth Living consists of three parts that further unfold the question of whose life holds value under ableist capitalism: "Pain," "Disability," and "Ability." In "Pain," Reynolds draws on both a survey of theories of pain—religious-moral, neurobiological, humanist, existential, and Medical—and his mother's personal narratives of living with complex regional pain syndrome to shape a phenomenology of chronic pain. This phenomenology consists of four features—foreboding, beholdenness, bioreckoning, and disruption—which each "exacerbate or mitigate each other" (50). For example, pain is simultaneously disruptive in its beholden and consuming nature under capitalist life demands, and foreboding in its demand for bioreckoning one's life through social and medical intervention. From this structured loop of chronic pain, Reynolds formulates three categories of pain: Component Pain/Feeling Pain, Constitutive Pain/Integral Suffering, and Consuming Pain/Extreme Suffering. The ableist conflation of disability and pain assumes that disability must always place an individual in the category of suffering or even extreme suffering. This assumption, however, is clearly demonstrated as false.

Building on disability studies scholarship, Reynolds begins part two, "Disability," by examining three primary theories of disability—personal (such as the moral and medical models), social, and post-social—to illustrate a general inconsistency in understanding disability and to underline the necessity for a phenomenology of disability and disabled embodiment. Through a thorough engagement with S. Kay Toombs's personal narratives of multiple sclerosis, Reynolds provides three "general structures of the lived experience of disability" (93)—attentional (re)configuration, personal-social (re)configuration, and horizontal (re)configuration—which emphasize disability as a shaper of meaning,

relationality, socio-spatial salience, and knowledge production for disabled people. Counter to the ableist conflation, this phenomenology of disability demonstrates that diverse ways of being do not mean *worse* or *bad* ways of being.

In part three, "ability," Reynolds again begins by examining the existing theories; this time focusing primarily on the theory of "personal ability" (117), which is premised both on both the assumption of a standard body capable of perfectibility—centrally, through health, regard, and control—and on a secondary conflation of "individual autonomy" with "full independence." Reynolds further points out in this part a central idea for the book at large: that ability articulates *avenues* of access. For Reynolds, ability is relative to situational and historical context and could shift to an inability at the loss of a "structural support assumed to be a constant" (130). The idea of ability as a constitutive variable dependent on "form, content, and value" (137) is central to Reynolds's phenomenology of ability —or, in the end, a phenomenology of care systems that determine whether someone is "made able (or not)" (130). By pointing out how systems of care are personal, social-interpersonal, and civic-political, Reynolds illustrates the numerous ways that systems existing under ableist capitalism (re)produce both ability and disability. The ableist conflation is fully deconstructed under the weight of "the interaction and interanimation of each [body or environment] relative to caring systems" (151).

Reynolds's *The Life Worth Living* ultimately calls for a reconsideration of the ableist conflation of disability to build an anti-ableist future—one where disabled people are valued and disabled life is celebrated as human diversity rather than abhorred lack. Overall, this well-researched and passionately written book urges us towards a reconsideration of pain, disability, and ability to imagine more equitable systems of care. While those studying disability studies and philosophy may be an obvious audience for *The Life Worth Living*, anyone interested in the

ways we discuss disability, bodies, and care for each other will find memorable value in this work.

Author Information

Kora Dzbinski

Kora Dzbinski (they/them) is a Mad poet, care worker, and disability studies graduate student in Chicago, Illinois.

View all of Kora Dzbinski's articles.

Article details

Kora Dzbinski, "Review of *The Life Worth Living: Disability, Pain, and Morality* by Joel Michael Reynolds (University of Minnesota Press)," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.20

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *Maroon Choreography* by fahima ife (Duke University Press)

by Walter Lucken IV | Book Reviews, Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

ABSTRACT In *Maroon Choreography*, fahima ife follows the policing of Black and Indigenous life across Western modernity in a series of meditations on the "discipling" of the English language in literature and pedagogy, asking us to consider how the afterlife or afterlives of slavery and the present reality of coloniality echoes in our more closely held assumptions about the relationship between language and power. Each of the book's four sections meditates on a particular aspect of these contradictions, unpacking how certain intellectual projects and submerged knowledges cannot be understood in "disciplined English." These stylistic choices function on both a creative and critical level, leaving us with a text that will challenge a wide range of audiences across the humanities and be instructive in our classrooms and workshops.

KEYWORDS Black studies, decolonial, literature, pedagogy

Maroon Choreography. By fahima ife. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021, pp.144 (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1425-6. US List $22.95.

"What undocumented black indigenous knowledges emerged in the seventeenth century on Turtle Island?" asks fahima ife (x). She asks us this in *Maroon Choreography*'s prefatory note on how these knowledges "persist in our contemporary air," going on to explain that the book will indeed not answer either question, but rather "move inside the pneumatic feeling of fleeing in seventeenth-century black indigenous escape," (x) lingering there for the book's four sections.

These questions set the stage for *Maroon Choreography*'s primary thrust. In it, ife maps the conditioning and policing of Black and Indigenous bodies across

Western modernity through, beyond, and against the English language itself. In so doing, ife draws out the ways in which settler colonization—alongside slavery and its afterlives—takes shape both within and throughout the English language and its prescribed "norms" in writing and pedagogy. The experimental form ife employs throughout itself presents a series of arguments about the relationships between coloniality, slavery, and its afterlives, and the English language. Each section meditates on a particular aspect of this matrix of relationships, unpacking how certain fugitive registers remain unintelligible or illegible in "disciplined English." These stylistic choices function on both a creative and critical level, leaving us with a text that audiences across a wide range of fields will find challenging and instructive.

For ife, a body which refuses the choreography of the plantation complex, then, with a fugitive "anachoreography" of its own, is one which organizes its capacity for speech and writing against the racialized conventions of English. In this sense, ife shows us how speech and breath organize the capacity for language within the body itself, opening a path for the reader to imagine a fugitive counterhistory of the English language's career on Turtle Island. ife critiques the university as well, noting how "inside the academy there are fields and bodies," as well as "conversations on how those fields and bodies remain in isolation" (xi). In its juxtaposition with ife's notion that the "disciplined body" is one that moves within captivity's expectations for expression, we can begin to glimpse how the afterlife of slavery reproduces its violence within the grammars of academic knowledge production itself, particularly for those of us who study English language, literacy, and pedagogy.

The first, "recrudescence," introduces the reader to a world lush with vegetation that is hot, humid, and hidden from the Apollonian eye of coloniality, meditating on the uncommonly used term "recrudescence" which refers to the renewed outbreak of disease or return to an undesirable condition. The use of the term itself suggests a level of ambiguity, raising the question of whether the term is

suggestive of renewed conditions of oppression, or of renewed resistance. The world, ife shows us in this section, is one teeming with fugitive life and glistening possibility, ectoplasm, wet words, and secrets. This world is one in which undocumented Black Indigenous knowledges take shape in the shadows of English syntax—one beyond the reach of what ife terms choreography—as the "commands of writing." With its focus on plant life and the ways in which vegetation defies anthropocentric (and thus Eurocentric) conceptions of life and agency, "recrudescence" illustrates how even fugitive plant life refuses any system of ordering or taxonomy.

The second section, "porous aftermath," follows an unnamed family from the "liquid edge" between plantation and fecund swamp, through a zone between"between plantation memory and cosmic impulse" (17). By pointing to what seems at first glance to be an imagined past, ife draws the reader's attention to how Black collectivities negotiate time and the afterlives of slavery. The unnamed family of the second section moves through a series of scenes, from weeping in an "inside space" to a stunning couplet where ife summons "apex predator as human child," (26) calling to mind John Dilulio's 1995 specter of the "super predator," an imagined Black male juvenile offender who "can rape, kill, maim, without giving it a second thought," calling to our attention the reproduction of slavery's afterlives within contemporary public discourse, alongside its consequence for Black life in the present. Ending the section, ife returns to the vegetal, with the closing note that the family we follow through the section resolves "not to be a human," nor "seven fugitives," but "only trees" (48).

The third section, "nocturnal work," which considers the work of arts and letters itself—and how the realms of scholarly and cultural production make sense of coloniality and the afterlives of slavery—seems to step into a more complex system of verse, or rather a more multifaceted set of grammars and synaxes, beginning to push in a slightly more expository direction without drifting too far into what we might call a colonial legibility. This section, for me, had the

unexpected effect of showing that the myriad references to thinkers and texts from Black studies, which I had organized into a canon of sorts over the last few years, are, in a sense, a gesture of choreography. When I imagine a citational web of connections between Fred Moten and Eduoard Glissant, one which I might employ to make their thinking legible to an undergraduate student, I am in effect inscribing a certain "command of writing." By naming Moten, Glissant, and others but refusing to clarify the way they connect to each other within the section, ife teaches us that the "disciplined body" of even the early career humanities academic cannot fully grasp either. To this point, ife's poem "fleurs sauvages" (74) again collapses time and space, returning to the complex relationship between memory and the present as "anamnesis and soul airs" (65). Anamnesis, to my understanding, refers to the remembrance of a past life. To air, in the verb form, is to broadcast, be broadcasted, or project. What does it mean for soul and the remembrance of past lives to air in a maroon choreography? For want of a clear answer, which would run counter to how I understand the book's aim, I began to suspect in my journey through the book's third section that the notion of agency itself and the distinction between agents and subjects was perhaps blurrier than I thought. Maybe then, to air is to be aired, or to be air in the sense of being both present and absent.

The book's final section, the titular "maroon choreography," both approaches and unsettles essay form, taking shape in one long uninterrupted paragraph. In it, ife connects the books previous threads and re-connects its various thematic and stylistic elements into a more cohesive and organized statement about the relationship between racial-colonial power and the "disciplining" of language. I noticed that as the book's sections moved closer and closer to a writing style which I might consider legible—which is to say, choreographed—I began to see more and more what ife means in the introduction when she cautions the reader that the book will only work for readers who are themselves open. The experience of finding my trained impulses to search for explicit meanings, topic sentences, or even a larger grammar I could impose on the book's four sections butting against

a more vegetal and clandestine system of meaning eventually led me to read the entire book over again, in hopes that repetition and even reading the pages aloud might help me "arrive in communion," (xiiii)as ife puts it in the prefatory note. While ife's meditation on the relationship between language and power across modernity's *longue durée* resists a standard synopsis, toward the end she teaches us quite pointedly that even our most critical insights about language and power reproduce coloniality by organizing symbolic expressions of power and power itself into distinct categories. For those working at the intersection of pedagogy, cultural studies, literature, and the broader humanities, *maroon choreography* will be an invaluable occasion to question the foundations of our knowledge and practice and re-examine our basic assumptions. Scholars in Black, Latinx, and American Studies will find this book particularly indispensable as we come to a more reflective moment following the 2020 uprisings, and especially as we consider how the resources of our intellectual projects might contribute to the struggle for justice and decolonization in Palestine.

Author Information

Walter Lucken IV

Walter Lucken IV is Assistant Professor of English at Queens College of the City University of New York. His work focuses on public rhetorics of state violence, the academic humanities, and social movements. His previous writing has appeared in *Art & the Public Sphere*, *Refractions Journal*, *Community Literacy Journal*, and *Michigan Quarterly Review*. He lives in New York City.

View all of Walter Lucken IV's articles.

Article details

Walter Lucken IV, "Review of *Maroon Choreography* by fahima ife (Duke University Press)," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.21

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053